

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” John 3:16.

If you pay close attention, you may have noticed that this is the second time in our liturgical year that we hear on Sunday this famous verse from John. The first time was during Lent. Well, I paid attention because I was already preaching on that day! What is different though from last time is that during Lent we only heard about Jesus’ words on salvation, but today we have the story. And it’s interesting because it is the same in the Gospel than it is in life: to understand, it’s not enough to report what so and so have been saying, you need to hear the whole story. It’s not only about context, cultural references, it’s about intentionality. Why this has been said, how it has been said, to whom, at what end...We don’t just talk: We say something to someone. Our words are powerful tools that are aimed to accomplish something.

We often use John 3:16 as a basis for the Christian faith, the Gospel in a nutshell, the minimum you have to believe to be a Christian and to be saved. And Trinity Sunday is certainly this time of the year where we think about Christian doctrine and what it is to believe. We will read together today the Creed of St Athanasius that reminds us, as it concludes: “The universal faith, which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved.” Sounds important. Yet today, on this Sunday among all Sundays, what is brilliant about our Gospel story is that we meet with a man who is everything but a man of certainty, and what is even more brilliant about our story is that it is because he cannot believe that he can actually have this encounter with Jesus, who, far from rejecting him for his shaking faith, share with him an exceptional moment of teaching.

Let me explain. Nicodemus was a religious leader, a member of the Sanhedrin. And yet, at night, instead of studying the Torah, as it was the habit for the rabbis, he re-enrolls the scrolls and go take a walk to meet Jesus to question him – not to test him – but to learn more, because, as he confesses himself, he saw something in him. Something of God acting in Jesus, he who, to the eyes of the other Pharisees, was nothing, a young itinerant preacher, without any kind of official religious authority. Now, it’s like the bishop asking the seminarian to teach him about God!

But Nicodemus is man of great humility, who does not think some people are better than others or privileged by God because of their social status or education. He is also, and in this a lot of us can probably relate to him, a man who doubts. John does not mention that the scene takes place at night for some random reason, to put some decor. In John's Gospel the mention of the time, hour and season, are always very precise and intentional. Now, if you're often up at night, you probably already know insomnia can bring up all sorts of questioning, sometimes anxieties. And I guess this is the place Nicodemus is in. This is exactly as such that Jesus welcomes him. Actually, Jesus says: "Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?". To me, there is more irony and tenderness in those words, than rebuke and judgment. Jesus does not waste time explaining things to the know-it-all who would not listen. But Nicodemus is open and curious, he acknowledges his ignorance and he wants to learn more, and that's when, unlike the other pharisees, he will be able to receive something greater than "faith as he has always known it." We just have celebrated Pentecost and have been reminded of all the gifts of the Spirit: joy, peace...Yet, a way we often come to experience the Holy Spirit in our lives is discomfort. I was reminded of that listening to this beautiful lesson from Isaiah we always read for ordination. Actually religious call, whether lay or ordained, seldom starts with seeing angels. Our deepest spiritual journeys start more often when we don't think anymore about life or God the way we have always thought about them before, when we don't feel we fit that well in our families or communities, when we experience the nudge to take a walk in the dark.

This is counter intuitive. So much of our religion is about being in the light, being positive and having certainties. That's the way we often use John 3:16. Yet, as we discover today there is literally more to the story. Thomas Moore, a former catholic monk and a psychologist, wrote about the dark nights of the soul, and he says: "Religion often avoids the dark by hiding behind platitudes and false assurances. It can easily becomes a defense and an avoidance. This is not the real purpose of religion. But there is real religion and empty shell of religion. Know the difference. Your life is at stake. Flight from the dark infantilize you spiritually, because the dark nights of the souls are supposed to initiate you into spiritual adulthood."

*You have to enter spiritual adulthood.* Well, I think this is what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus when he tells him he has to be born again. It's not enough to be a good Jew studying the Torah and pretending to know the difference between right and wrong. You can go further. Faith is not always about immediacy and certainty as surely as birthing is not about immediacy and certainty. It's always a long process. If you know anything about birthing, a child, a book, a project, you probably very much have this sense that birthing is a mix of joy and pain, desire and fears, work and wait, hope and silences. The darkness is not always terrors and evil, it can be the darkness of the womb, of being created. We are in this world inside God's womb, waiting for the day of deliverance when we can meet God face to face, in the meantime, we are being transformed. As the fetus is transformed into someone who is able to live this life on earth, our human lives can prepare us to the life of the Kingdom of God.

Believing this could make us look at our challenges in a very different way. We often have a sense, and that's sometimes the reason why we don't sleep well at night, that life is full of problems to solve, obstacles to overcome, and we generally assume that once our problems will be solved, we will be "saved" on a human or on a spiritual level. Yet, if we start considering our challenges as a natural process of maturation, we would be less likely to exhaust ourselves worrying and fighting, being more willing to listen to what's really going on and let God instruct us, giving us, as we walk through the dark, a deeper sense of who we are and what life is really about. To give you a quick and simple example, I read this week about a woman whose unique passion in life was cooking. Unfortunately, she almost lost one of her hands in a car accident and discovered she would never be able to use her hand as she used to. Well, she said, now in spite of the pain and the frustration, she realized that there was actually no need to rush when she cooks, as she had been taught to do. Now it may take her minutes to peel an onion instead of a few seconds, but she has started enjoying all the smells, textures and colors of the food. It does not make what happened to her okay, it may not make her more happy, but it gave her deepness, an awareness she did not have before. She was transformed by her trial, and this not by rejecting it, but by going with it.

It is to be reborn a spiritual being as it is to be born a child: there is very little we can do, and actually often fighting makes things worse. What can do is to cooperate, to look at ourselves with great humility, acknowledging that life can be hard, sometimes ironic or ambiguous, but can also be filled with the Holy Spirit who, like the wind, always come from where we would the least expect. From there, we could leave room for God to bring us into spiritual adulthood and transform us into more complex and soulful people.

Deepness. Perspective. I think this is what the doctrine of the Trinity is all about. Our God is not a one dimension God, a man with a beard in the sky who will come to our rescue when things don't go well. On Trinity Sunday, we are invited to enter the mystery of God who chose to present Godself as a Father who gave his Son out of love for the world, this Son being himself God, as is the spirit of love between them. Which means: We are not faced with God, we are in God's love's community each time we respond, as Jesus did, to the love we receive. Anything that happens in our lives, even in its darkest hours, can be an opportunity for awakening our intelligence, opening our hearts and deepening our love. Certainty is not an intellectual conviction, it's about being caught, no matter what, in God's embrace. And so to me, what Jesus says when he talks to Nicodemus, is not that we will be saved if we say a magic formula that makes God happy and so God to reward us will open for us the doors of heaven! More likely, Jesus could mean that Nicodemus just has to realize that it is real, that the doors are already open, that we are loved and welcomed. To me, what Jesus's words are meant to accomplish is not a prescription for salvation, it is salvation itself. You just have to realize it's true and that salvation is already happening. We are in the process to be born children of God, as Paul reminds us, and so although there are doubts and fears, and even darkness, there is in the end no reason for anxiety. As Master Eckhart, a mystic of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, puts it: *You just have to let God be God inside of you.* Maybe we are not so much called to believe that we hold the truth than we are called to believe that we are held by the truth, a truth that is always to be rediscovered. Amen.