

There was a man named Nicodemus who was a devout, religious person. Nicodemus, we must assume, loved God and lived a holy life. He came to Jesus, not in any hostile or angry way, and he acknowledged Jesus as clearly a teacher from God. Nicodemus must have asked Jesus a question, because the evangelist, John, reveals the Savior's answer, without telling us what Nicodemus said. A good guess is that he asked, "What must I do to truly abide with God," or to put that another way, "What must I do to be saved?"

This is a question that all of us ask, at one point or another, and it is the most fundamental question of all. Sometimes it reflects anxiety, a sense that not all is well with one's soul. Sometimes, it reflects a desire for spiritual growth. Jesus said, to be right with God, you have to be born from above. The Lord went on to explain that one must be born of God, in our Lord's words, be "born of water and the Spirit." The Christian Church has always understood this as referring to baptism, and most consider this sacrament as essential. I think, in the context, John's Gospel is saying something more.

For us to be reconciled to God, we have to put the cares and concerns of this world behind our love of God, and we have to commit ourselves to following in the footsteps of Jesus. This is a spiritual journey, and to travel this royal highway, one must accept Jesus as savior and commit to a life of servitude to God. One does this by striving to increasingly let go of those things which we know to separate us from God's love, things that seem to center around the self at the expense of others, love of the self as opposed to the love of God and neighbor. There is, in everyone, a fundamental narcissism, and the spiritual journey is the life-long quest of leaving the narcissism behind and moving evermore beneath the Cross. Jesus said, "Whoever would come after me, let him deny himself and take up the cross and follow." There is but one way to eternal life in the grace and love of the Father, and that is through redemption in Jesus Christ.

As Christians, we begin this spiritual journey by being baptized in water, a baptism that symbolizes a spiritual washing in the blood of our Lord. We are made clean by that washing, and if we take the baptismal vows seriously, and strive to be disciples, the Holy Spirit, who becomes both our advocate and our guide, sustains us in our life in Christ. God, the Holy Spirit, will indeed lead us in life, enabling us to do those things which are pleasing to God and to be effective disciples of Jesus, our Master. Jesus said that we must be "born of the Spirit;" we find that we borne by the Spirit, as in carried by the Spirit, too. I believe that this is what Jesus had in mind when he said, in today's Gospel reading, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." The Spirit carries us, day in and day out, when we strive to do the Master's work. Where God might take us is always a surprise, but he will take us where we can best do the disciple's work of knowing Christ and making him known.

What this all has to do with Lent is that Lent is a special time in our lives for getting in touch with our spiritual reality. Lent is a time for taking measure. How well are we doing as disciples? What are our shortcomings? How can we improve? Lent is a penitential season, because we acknowledge that we do fall short of that which God asks. But always, we must balance our shortcomings with the sure and certain knowledge that in Christ we are forgiven. In Christ, we have salvation.

Today's passage from John's Gospel ends with the best-known words in all of Holy Scripture, John

3:16-17. Never leave out verse seventeen, because sixteen makes no sense without it. John 3:16 say, "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 3:17 tells us not to despair if we worry that we might fall short. It is God's desire to forgive us. Redemption is our God's intention. John 3:17 assures us of this. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

When we stand with Nicodemus and ask the common question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life," the answer is simple. Jesus has responded: "Come, follow me." *Amen.*

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