

Sermon on John 3:1-8a

Prayer

Holy God,
You challenge ordinary people
to live in your truth and love.
As we meet today,
Touch our hearts with your awesome mystery.
Amen.

The evangelist John's gospel often is a mystery to me.

If we read the story of Nicodemus and Jesus which is the basis for my sermon today, we enter a totally different world: I suppose you noticed it too when you heard the story just now.

Many well known words, familiar phrases and essential statements about heaven and earth, about spirit and flesh, about light and darkness ...
Much of what we have already come across before... but still part of John's world is foreign to us – far away and mysterious.

The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus is an almost perfect example of mis-communication. Nicodemus does not understand at all. Jesus' words remain a mystery to him...they have another meaning for Nicodemus. The same words can mean so many different things in people's lives... We here at Peace Church know that.

While I think about the text and what its message might be to us today, I realise the risk that the misunderstanding between Jesus and Nicodemus could remain in the sermon unless we learn to accept the mystery of the text, understand it as a journey, a wonder in process, as Catherine Keller, the American theology professor says in her book "On the Mystery" ...

The mystery in the gospel of John wanders with us and ahead of us and has no straight forward path. The mystery draws us onward. We are always trying to figure it out; to discern our way; to gather clues, hints, and signs.

And when we've finally got it, we may already have lost it again...

Is the mystery "God"?

And I guess the answer is yes. Divinity is surely a mystery.

So when we approach the gospel of John, we can probably only do it in the spirit of mystery, and with a theology which is constantly in process, which Catherine Keller calls a "way of open-ended interactivity".

Faith is not settled belief but a living process.

We step with trust into the next moment, into the unpredictable... allowing the mystery to remain what it is...

Let me invite you to come with me with me on a journey into the world of John?

We may change in that process... our image of God may change... all may be in the flow of becoming... becoming something new, someone new...

Let us understand meeting God and interpreting biblical texts as a journey. We never stand still. We never remain the same. There are no eternal truths, no predicted answers, but surprises, wonders, mysteries as we journey on...

So let us explore a bit of the mystery of God while we reflect on – John’s images of the night, of being born again, and of the wind.

The night:

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night.

A Pharisee. A counsellor. A leader of the Jews.

A person who usually lives and acts in the light of the day. Who leads and copes and organizes... Who knows and is expected to know where things come from and where they go.

But this night is special. Mysterious...

A representative of the “grey gentlemen” who normally “administers” daytime and logic and even business... is looking for something that he cannot possibly find in the light of the day... within the framework of what can be explained and what is normal and can be measured.

And I suspect he chooses the night in the first place - not because he does not want people to recognise him, not because he wants to stay anonymous.

Not because he wants to keep it a secret that he, an established theologian and an official of religion tries to get into contact with this unestablished, mysterious stranger whose life and teaching are somewhere beyond law and order...

I think Nicodemus probably chooses the night, because night is the only appropriate atmosphere to possibly get close to what he is looking for. There are gifts present in the darkness and Nicodemus seems at least to sense that. Darkness can be a place of birth and growth: the seed in the ground; the seed in the womb; the seed in our soul... In the dark lie possibilities for intimacy, for rest, for healing and revealing. The dark teaches us to rely on senses rather than sight...

...and Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night.

Nicodemus longs to get to know something from the other side... from the hidden parts, from the wonders of the world, from the surprises of human life, and from the mysteries of God.

Only the night gives him the chance to leave the world of facts and enter the mystery, the unknown and dark, the unconscious and emotional and changeable side of human life.

Nicodemus who knows everything about the day and the daylight, Nicodemus the scholar and teacher wants to discover what’s beyond... - and searches in the night.

There he might hope to find new perspectives, expects his horizon to widen and his thinking to enter the unknown spaces...

He might have always had a feeling for the mystery and the wonder of the night, a perception for its depth and different nature... He is captured by its magic... Drawn towards it – and decides to visit Jesus in the night.

Being born again:

Out of the logic of daylight Nicodemus asks: How can anyone be born again? After having grown old? Can one enter a second time the mother's womb and be born again? How on earth can everything just start from the beginning again?

Nicodemus doesn't believe being born again is at all possible. He thinks it would be a step back in time – and rationally of course impossible.

Nicodemus does not understand that he is in fact asked to go **back** in terms of go **beyond**... to enter somewhere he has never before been. That he is not expected to step back into his physical past but enter new spaces which he'd never before thought of.

And understandably Nicodemus finds it hard to understand.

Jesus' answer shows him that here and now two different worlds come together, touch, even clash... because there is a difference between them like day and night.

Jesus clarifies the conversation as far as possible:

Being born again, being born from above does not mean that one is born again of the flesh. The initial, natural birth of course is and stays natural; and it is the essential condition for all being born again and anew!

To be born means: to come to the world.

And to be born again, means: to enter the world again.... differently... see it with new eyes, receive it with a new spirit, and be an altogether different person, a renewed human being in God's creation. Being on the mystery, as Catherine Keller calls it...

The wind:

Nicodemus insists on asking how that can all happen...

and Jesus continues giving Nicodemus answers:

the wind – in Hebrew and in Greek is exactly the same word as is used for spirit - ...; the wind blows wherever it chooses.

You can feel it.

But you'll never manage to get hold of it.

And you never know where it comes from and where it goes.

Nicodemus had approached Jesus saying: Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God...

Nicodemus thought he knew... And now Jesus admits that he himself doesn't know.

That in fact nobody knows.

That there is a big mystery surrounding God and God's spirit... the human knowledge of God's unfathomable being and acting.

Nobody would ever really get hold of God's spirit.

Knowing that is part of our Christian faith, it is part of the journey of life with God...

And of course, it is a challenge for theology:

to admit the limits to all scientific efforts; to accept the pointlessness of so many attempts to try to order and regulate the divine... to store it in fixed forms and control it.

Calling God a mystery does not at all mean that God can't be experienced.

The wind does blow!

You cannot miss it.

But it takes more than the logic of the daylight to realise and notice it.

Conversations in the night might be necessary...

Visions in the night.
The wind blows...
Something happens.
Here and now.
It has got to do with us, our lives, our time, our reality.
The wind blows. The spirit is at work...
But not we decide. It is the wind itself.
Being born again cannot be made or forced to come about by us. It is not we who produce it.
The wind simply comes to us – like a tender rain in spring – or like a heavy storm – or like the birth of a child...
That may be difficult to accept:
for me – for you –
for a generation like ours who is used to being in charge and is always heading for ultimate control.

The misunderstanding between Jesus and Nicodemus reaches its climax in Nicodemus' persistent question:
how – how on earth can that be?
Nicodemus clearly shows his willingness, his urgent efforts to understand.
As a teacher of the Jews he is longing to see, to grasp, to create, to bring something about, to explain and achieve. Just as many of us do...

Don't we always admire, appreciate and envy those who are successfully working, living and achieving?
Don't the limits that are set for human beings always challenge us to go beyond?
Don't we often think we have to enlighten every mystery and unveil every secret?
Wheeling and dealing at any cost?
Causing inhumanity and injustice in so many fields...
Just think of the environment and the threat to nature caused by industrial production.
The growing unemployment rate. Neglecting community life. Risking peace and justice and human dignity. Just because we want more all the time and we want everything to be better, higher, faster, more efficient and never ending...
Just because we want to be in control: victims of the human delusion that everything could and should be possible – far beyond the limits of what is realistic, human, appropriate, possible and healthy...

According to Nicodemus' story the human desire to always be in control is a sign of the flesh, of being born of the flesh.
And its opposite is the world of the spirit.
The mystery...

Logic of the day versus the vision of the night.
And in all that the world of spirit offers a new beginning:
from above...
...which means: the possibility to start anew, to be born again, to make all things new - out of God's love to the world which cannot be finally understood, achieved or even produced.

This is still not easy for us, because we'd love to be in charge, and we hate letting go... and letting things happen.

But being born again bears new possibilities:
we can see life with new eyes;
we can get a new idea of the great mystery of God;
we can discover a love which we cannot create;
we can develop the ability to live with open questions, to accept mysteries and let secrets remain...

We could resist the challenge of constantly doing and producing and trying to get everything under control.

We might learn how to wait
and see
and feel
and dream
and hope
and simply be...

Beyond the clarity of daylight a mystery is waiting for Nicodemus.

It can enrich his life and widen his horizon ...

if only he asks his questions in the night
and lets the wind blow where it chooses.

Amen.

Poem by Jan Richardson

I cannot release the questions
with every step they multiply
and yet
they carry a wisdom
of their own
God of mystery
help me
to hold the questions
lead me
to live them
bless me to bless them
for disturbing
my path