

Lent 2
5/3/2023

Mark the Evangelist

Romans 4:1-5,13-17

Psalm 121

John 3:1-17

How can these things be?

[OR]

That's just nonsense Godsense!

In a sentence:

God doesn't 'make sense' to us but of us – giving us a new sense of ourselves, and Godself.

There are times in John's gospel when Jesus sounds a little like that kind of politician who is not interested in the question of an interviewer but avoids the question to make a point which enlarges himself or diminishes an opponent.

Jesus doesn't need to enlarge or diminish in that way, but that kind of mismatch of question and response occurs all the time in John's gospel. Seemingly intelligent people say seemingly sensible things to Jesus, and he responds with something which gives the impression that he's not heard the question. This gives the Jesus of John's gospel a *surreal* feel; in Jesus' interactions with others, everything goes a little bit Dali.

What John is getting at is this: the gospel's talk of the kingdom of God *makes no sense*. This is not to *dismiss* the gospel but simply to *describe* it. Nicodemus is a 'teacher of Israel' – a theologian. Theologians specialise in making sense of God, investigating and describing the patterns of God. *The theologian seeks order*, a place for at least most things, and most things in their place. What matters here, and what John challenges, is a particular kind of 'making sense' which tries to fit the things of God into a system of thinking and being which is already in place. Whether we imagine ourselves to be theologians or not, we imagine that God *should* 'make sense', by which we mean that God should fit somehow into the world as we know it.

Jesus contradicts this assumption. While the Nicodemus in all of us looks for God's predictability, Jesus offers an image of God as Spirit, playing on a double meaning in the Greek: the word translated as 'spirit' could also be translated as 'wind'. And so he says to the theologian, then and now, 'God is spirit, and so God is as orderly as the wind'.

Interestingly, if we leave the Nicodemus bits out, Jesus makes better sense:

Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. ... no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ... 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.

This is the kind of thing a 'spiritual' person might say: a nice little metaphor about rebirth and some suitably vague and new-agey remarks about spirituality implied in the blowing of the wind, with a characteristically religious contrast between spirit and flesh.

It is probably fair to say that our usual way of approaching this text and others like it is to leave Nicodemus out and focus on the religious affirmations Jesus makes. Consider what is most familiar to us about this passage: 'you must be born again', 'for God so

loved the world that he sent his only Son', etc. We typically receive these bare affirmations about our relationship to God without any reference to the confused Nicodemus, who hasn't got a clue what it all means. By extracting these sayings from the context of Nicodemus' confusion, we are given the impression that what Jesus says is an *easy* thing, as if it were clear what that might mean to say, 'You must be born again' (or 'from above' – another possible translation) – as if it were clear what it would look like, what we should do.

Leaving Nicodemus out leaves out the strangeness of all this and so obscures the unsettling nature of the gospel. If we are to benefit from what is said here between him and Jesus, we have to *be* Nicodemus in the story. This passage of scripture will be God's word to us when it does to *us* what Jesus did to Nicodemus – when it confounds us, confuses us, upsets us.

The upsetting thing Jesus presents to Nicodemus here is, most fundamentally, God's sovereign freedom. God is not to be made sense of because God – *this* God, at least – cannot be tied down, as one cannot tie down the wind. But the point here is not simply to disorient us and certainly not to mystify us. God's freedom is proclaimed so that we might find ourselves becoming free – ourselves coming to rebirth out of the wind-like Spirit. That God is free and sends the Son to save, means that we might become free too. God is God, not to cast away but to draw closer, not to condemn but to save, not simply to dislocate and to upset, but to relocate and reset.

If, then, God's being and action make no sense *to* us, it may yet make sense *of* us. But this takes time. We *grow* into the freedom of the children of God. No doubt, Nicodemus leaves Jesus confused. But Jesus is not finished with him, just as he will not be finished with any among us he might confuse or upset. Nicodemus will appear again in the middle of the gospel as a tentative supporter of Jesus before the religious council, of which he is a member (7.50f). And he will appear a last time after the crucifixion, bringing burial spices and helping to bear Jesus' body to the tomb (19.39-42).

Nicodemus, who in our present passage is described as having 'come to Jesus by night,' is described in his final appearance as the one who had '*at first* come to Jesus by night'. Nicodemus has developed a new sense of sense, which is as different from the old sense as day is from night. From that first secret and tentative approach to Jesus under the cover of darkness, Nicodemus finally appears publicly as one who has come and seen, and has watched, and followed. From the astonishment and denial of his first encounter, Nicodemus himself becomes astonishing before his fellow Jews, having moved finally to see value even in devotion to the broken body of Jesus.

God's engagement with us is that we might be re-sensed as Nicodemus was. This re-sensing is not simply an intellectual thing; it is not limited to our perception of ourselves, or God, or the world around us. It concerns also our lives as ethical, social and political creatures. This 'Godsense' will look like nonsense to everyone who imagines they have already worked everything out. Ten years ago it seemed to most of us to be nonsense that the best course of action would be to sell our property and go into the future without our own buildings. 'How could such things be?' It is not clear what 'born again' or 'born from above' actually looks like. If we could only have that time over! Godsense sees more freedom in the world than we expect to, or are willing to. Of course, the step we are now taking is not *really* a free one – we've run out of options and energy. Be that as it may, we might still look forward to what Godsense could make possible in whatever new world we find ourselves. It is not nonsense that the future might be different from the past, that things might be done differently, that directions can be changed, and we still be safe in the process.

So also for our personal lives: the gospel proposes to each of us a new sense of sense for ourselves and the lives we've been given to live. As we open ourselves to the surprises and contradictions Jesus brings, we open ourselves to be gradually transformed into something we were not at all expecting, but nonetheless discover to be good.

This is what we call a miracle, and it is the promise in the gospel: a new sense of sense. A new future. And new self with the renewing God.
