



Bishop David Oakley

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Letter for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, Laetare Sunday 2024

10th March 2024

To my dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

The Gospel today, and next week, is not from the Gospel of Mark. Instead, we listen to the Gospel of John. Jesus has called his first disciples. He has invited them to re-imagine faith as trust in him. They have witnessed the first sign, the changing of water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana. And then that somewhat disturbing event, the cleansing of the Temple that we reflected upon last week.

Now we meet another character. Not one of the disciples as such, but one described as ‘a leader of the Jews’. He is intrigued. He wants to know more. At the same time, Nicodemus is cautious. He wants to protect his reputation. Nicodemus has come to meet with Jesus by night. This great intellect is struggling to understand what Jesus is talking about. ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old?’ He is not prepared, at this point, to come out into the open about his interest in Jesus. And this blinds him to so many truths of God’s Kingdom.

In today’s Gospel, we join the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus towards the end. Nicodemus seems to be out of his depth. Our Lord is speaking about baptism. And the root of the word “baptism” is to be immersed into something. Through our baptism we are immersed into the life of the Blessed Trinity. We are born into the relationship that Jesus has with his heavenly Father. When Jesus is lifted up on the Cross, and sheds his last drop of blood in love for us, the gates of heaven are thrown open to us. And we receive all this when we are baptised.

Perhaps we are inclined to imagine that the gift we receive in baptism, must be carefully carried throughout our lives, so that we may be able to hand it back at the end. This is not how Jesus sees things. He does speak of the one servant who buries his gift in this manner. But he also speaks of others, servants who believe that what they have received, are gifts destined to grow.

We too hear the words Jesus spoke to Nicodemus. They are life-giving words which speak of God’s love for our world. They witness to the eternal life, first offered us in baptism, and brought to new growth through our everyday lives of faith. The ancient philosophers thought that philosophy brought people out of darkness into light. The Gospel of Nicodemus shows us how challenging our minds can be at times, when it comes to receiving the Gospel of life. During these days of Lent, we are invited to walk humbly with the Lord. Someone once said, faith is not about knowing something new, it’s a new way of knowing. Through faith, we can see the world with different eyes. We recognise a world loved by God. And it is heart-breaking to witness all the pain and hurt around us. We need to find ways to speak the language of God’s Kingdom to our world today. And that language is love.

Sincerely,

Bishop David Oakley

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