

Chapter 1: Jesus and Nicodemus

1. Introduction

LIFE is full of encounters. From our infancy, we meet the members of our family, our parents, neighbours and friends. We learn from their ways of thinking, of speaking, their expressions and their actions. Our personality develops within a society where people have diverse problems and opinions, and seek to build a better world. Amidst these encounters, there may be one which has the power to change one's life and to transform it in a way that is more realistic and more important. Many seek such an encounter, and dream of a heart which beats with love and joy. Some are successful in this encounter. Others, sadly, distort the dream into a search for wealth, fame, importance of position and social success.

We see that with God, the procedure is different. It is not man who seeks to encounter God. It is God Himself who comes towards us, and who meets each individual, in order to reveal to him His love. God became man and has entered into relationship with our world. He has united Heaven and Earth and has granted us eternal life. It is enough for a man to meet Jesus, who has come towards Him, so that his heart may be filled with living water and will never thirst again, and will never hunger again; and he will be born to eternal life, and shall grow like a cedar that will never die.

2. Reading and Understanding the Gospel:

The meeting of Jesus and Nicodemus (Jn 3:1-21)

¹There was one of the Pharisees called Nicodemus, a leading Jew, ²who came to Jesus by night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who comes from God; for no one could perform the signs that you do unless God were with him." ³Jesus answered: "I tell you most solemnly, unless a man is born from above, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." ⁴Nicodemus said, "How can a grown man be born? Can he go back into his mother's womb and be born again?"

⁵Jesus replied: "I tell you most solemnly, unless a man is born through water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God: ⁶what is born of the flesh is flesh; what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be surprised when I say: You must be born from above. ⁸The wind blows wherever it pleases; you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. That is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit." ⁹"How can that be possible?" asked Nicodemus. ¹⁰"You, a teacher in Israel, and you do not know these things!" replied Jesus.

¹¹"I tell you most solemnly, we speak only about what we know and witness only to what we have seen and yet you people reject our evidence. ¹²If you do not believe me when I speak about things in this world, how are you going to believe me when I speak to you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has gone up to Heaven except the one who came down from Heaven, the Son of Man who is in Heaven; and the Son of Man must be lifted up¹⁴as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, ¹⁵so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. ¹⁶Yes, God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost but may have eternal life. ¹⁷For God sent His Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through Him the world might be saved. ¹⁸No one who believes in Him will be condemned; but whoever refuses to believe is condemned already, because he has refused to believe in the name of God's only Son. ¹⁹On these grounds is sentence pronounced: that though the light has come into the world men have shown they prefer darkness to the light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰And indeed, everybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, for fear his actions should be exposed; ²¹but the man who lives by the truth comes out into the light, so that it may be plainly seen that what he does is done in God."

2.1 Explanation

- Introduction: Nicodemus is a Pharisee from Galilee and a member of the Sanhedrin (composed of Priests, Scribes and Elders). He is mentioned only in the Fourth Gospel, in three places: 3:1-21; 7:50; 19:39.
- He comes at night: the night symbolizes the realm of the devil. After the Last Supper, Judas leaves the room and the Evangelist adds, "Night had fallen" (Jn 13:30); in other words, Judas left the light (Jesus) to go into the darkness. Nicodemus does the reverse; he leaves the night for the light. This nocturnal visit could be explained either by fear of the Jews or – which is more likely – by the rabbinic custom of rising at night to study the Torah.

A: First part of the text: the dialogue with Jesus (Jn 3:2-10)

- For Nicodemus (vv.1, 2, 4, 9) Jesus is a "teacher who comes from God", a teacher distinguished from others. He addresses him respectfully as "Rabbi" as he would a colleague. The pronoun "we", which he uses, suggests all those who consider that God is with Jesus, thanks to the signs that he reveals. Nicodemus speaks on a superficial, natural level, concerning birth from the womb of the mother, to which Jesus himself responds on a deeper, spiritual level, when he speaks of a birth that is not of the body.
- Jesus' responses (vv.3:2-10) are to correct Nicodemus' idea of the identity of the Messiah, that is, the earthly and political identity of Jesus. Jesus teaches him that the real encounter with the Messiah is not based on a superficial, natural knowledge, but is through a profound experience of communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- v.3: Jesus answered: "I tell you most solemnly, unless a man is born from above, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." This birth from "above" is the condition for seeing (and entering) the Kingdom of God.
- v.5: Jesus replied: "I tell you most solemnly, unless a man is born through water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God". Birth through water and the Spirit is Baptism, which makes us children of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. Water, we find, had spiritual meanings in the Old Testament (see Ezek 36:25; Gen 1:2; Is 44:2-3); the connection between water and the Spirit is found in the New Testament in Jn 7:37.

- v.6: “what is born of the flesh is flesh; what is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Birth in the flesh is fragile and is destined for death. But birth in the Spirit is spiritual rebirth destined for real, fulfilling and eternal life, bringing man to share in life with God.
- v.8: “The wind blows wherever it pleases; you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. That is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit.” The Greek word *pneuma* is the equivalent of the Hebrew word *ruah*, signifying “wind” or “spirit”. The Old Testament frequently compares God’s concealed action to a hidden wind (cf. Ecc 11:5).
- v.10: “You, a teacher in Israel, and you do not know these things!” replied Jesus. Nicodemus should have understood Jesus, for the Old Testament speaks of the divine fatherhood (Hosea 11:1 “I called my son out of Egypt”), the spiritual rebirth and the pouring out of the Spirit in Messianic times (Apoc 3).

B: Second part of the text: the monologue of Jesus or his sermon (Jn 3:11-21)

- v.13: “Ascending and descending from Heaven” (v.13) is often interpreted as the ascension and the incarnation. The true sense is that Jesus can speak of heavenly matters because he is from Heaven and has come from Heaven. Jews firmly believed that no man has ever ascended to Heaven to learn directly the will of God; however, through Jesus, it is no longer impossible to know the divine wisdom which has been revealed in our redemption, achieved by his death on the Cross.
- v.14: “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness and if any person was bitten by a serpent, he looked at the bronze serpent and lived (Num 21:4-9). Similarly, anyone who gazes at the Crucified Jesus in faith is redeemed. So, what does Jesus being lifted up mean? It means Jesus was crucified, and glorified in his resurrection and ascension.
- vv.16-18: Yes, “God loved the world so much that he gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost but may have eternal life.” For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through Him the world might be saved. No one who believes in Him will be condemned; but whoever refuses to believe is condemned already, because He has refused to believe in the name of God’s only Son. These verses speak of God’s love for Man, His plan of salvation and Man’s response in faith. The words “only Son” indicate Isaac (in the Old Testament) and Jesus (in the New Testament).
- Another Trinitarian scheme is suggested by this Evangelist: the time of the Father (v.16-21), of the Son (v.9-15) and of the Holy Spirit (v.1-8).
- In the Gospel of John, redemption is a dynamic reality in action: whoever accepts and believes, will be redeemed. Redemption is compared to light: when this Light came, people were divided into those who accepted Him and those who chose darkness.

2.2 Summary and Practice

Today's Gospel invites me to desire rebirth. I will leave my past path of darkness and follow the Light of Christ, which renews my life and gives it meaning and richness. Rebirth is no easy task, for with each new birth come the pains of being born, the griefs of change, the distress of dropping bad habits of the past, of putting on the new robe, symbolising purity and holiness.

Also, this text teaches me that rebirth requires that I live the life of the Spirit, according to God's will, getting to know that loving Father, the Redeemer Son who was incarnate (became flesh) and was lifted up on the Cross to redeem me, and the Holy Spirit, source of renewal and holiness.

3. Theological and Spiritual Teaching: Rebirth and Life in the Spirit

Each birth is in itself a gift for the newborn, for no one comes into the world by his own efforts, but through his parents and by the grace of God. Therefore, birth in the Spirit is – above all – a free gift from God. This gift is freely given to Man without any merit on his side. It is his duty to accept the gift, deal with it, and respond to the call of God in his heart. So it is for Nicodemus and many others going to meet Jesus; God has sent into their hearts the desire to meet Him. The words of Jesus, His actions and first contacts, have overwhelmed their hearts; they have realised that the Spirit of God had predisposed them to react to what they have seen and heard Jesus do.

Thus, begins the birth, and God continues His action when Man responds to His call. Indeed, parents who have given life to a baby, nurture their relationship with the child, educating and loving the little one in ways that defy description. How much more, then, does God incite in us the passion to meet Him, that He will continue to take charge of us, until we get to know Him deeper and better and to be reborn each day. Rebirth in the Spirit is not a single instance: it is a continuous work of grace, through which we pass from the old man to the new man, opening ourselves to the work of God in our lives and in the world.

In this rebirth, two important elements should be mentioned:

1. Getting to know Jesus: in fact, we are reborn in order to live with Him. The Gospel and the Faith of the Church are important in our journey towards rebirth. As we discover the realities and meanings of Faith in life, we can believe that Faith and build our choices in life accordingly.

2. Opening up to the experiences of life: each person lives many events in his daily life, but the believer seeks to rethink these events, searching to hear what God wishes to say to him. Amongst his many personal thoughts and emotions, the believer examines his heart and mind in the light of the Gospel, to discover what God seeks. Such experiences allow us to discern God's presence in our life and transform us into disciples and friends of Jesus.

When I am ready to declare my life bound to Jesus the Redeemer, whom I know well by now, I present myself to the Church to receive the Sacrament of Baptism, the grace through which God grants my rebirth, to declare His fatherhood of myself and my belonging to the Church; thus, I will be re clothed in Christ and I will become a Temple of the Holy Spirit.

4. Reading and Meditation: A Reading from Cyril of Jerusalem (c.313-386)

Preparing for Baptism

Already there is an odour of blessedness upon you, O you who are soon to be enlightened; already you are gathering the spiritual flowers, to weave heavenly crowns; already the fragrance of the Holy Spirit has breathed upon you; already you have gathered round the vestibule of the King's palace; may you be led in also by the King! For blossoms now have appeared upon the trees; may the fruit also be found perfect! Thus far there has been an inscription of your names, and a call to service, and torches of the bridal train, and a longing for heavenly citizenship, and a good purpose, and hope attendant thereon. For he lies not who said, that to them that love God all things work together for good (Rom 8:28). God is lavish in generosity, yet He waits for each man's genuine will; therefore, the Apostle added and said, to them that are called according to a purpose. The honesty of purpose makes you called: for if your body be here but not your mind, it profits you nothing.⁴



⁴ St Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procatechesis*, 1.