

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

*Gospel: John 3:14-21*

Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

"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. 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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

### REFLECTION 1:

### THE VISITOR BY NIGHT

I often wonder about the man who so often comes to Croke Park and displays a large placard that reads John 3: 16. How many supporters made note of the reference and looked up the passage in the Gospel of John? The verse is included in the Gospel today and it reads, 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life'. The Evangelist puts these words on the lips of Jesus with Nicodemus who was a Pharisee, a teacher among the Israelites and a prominent synagogue ruler. He was part of a learned group of Jews who were well disposed to Jesus. They were impressed by his teachings and healings, but really didn't understand Jesus' plan or purpose. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were both said to be disciples of Jesus secretly 'for fear of the Jews'. They represented the kind of timid disciple that John the Evangelist wished to persuade to come out openly for Jesus. So often too, timidity holds us back from being bold in our commitment to Jesus. What is said to Nicodemus is for our ears as well.

Being somewhat shy and timid Nicodemus preferred to come to Jesus for a chat by night so his presence could not be observed by his colleagues. Jesus speaks to him of being born again from above which rather puzzles his visitor but Jesus enlightens him by saying it affirms that the rebirth of sinners depends on the lifting up of the Son of Man. By referring to Moses and the story about the venomous snakes, Jesus introduces the notion of healing and salvation. Just as those afflicted in the desert looked on the serpent fashioned in bronze held up by Moses and were made whole. So also those who look up and believe in the Son of Man (Jesus himself) will also be saved. Jesus' use of the words 'lifted up' carries a double meaning in addition to referring to Jesus' death on the cross, this term also looks ahead to Jesus' being lifted up to life and to glory in his resurrection. Centuries earlier Isaiah had used the phrase about the future Messiah being 'lifted up and glorified exceedingly' (Isa. 53). God gave his Son to be born into human flesh and allowed that in the flesh, the Son would suffer and die for the sins of mankind, not because of any human merit but because God loves. Because of God's love, eternal life is accessible to all, not just after death but here and now, through our belief in Jesus. This belief enables us to venture out of the darkness where evil thrives and into the light where goodness prevails. This theme of light and contrast with darkness is adopted by Jesus who makes himself known as the light of the world and challenges his followers to be similarly luminous.

Soon the light of Christ, which shines within every believer will be celebrated at the Easter Vigil. So, anticipating that celebration, we pray in the words of the Exultet – the Easter hymn - 'May the light of Christ, rising in his glory dispel the darkness of our minds and hearts...may he who is the morning star

find it burning – that morning star that never sets, that morning star which rising again from the grave, faithfully sheds light on all the human race’.

Only after Jesus died did Nicodemus come out of the darkness into the light to help with Jesus’ burial. In this Nicodemus offers hope to those of us who are hesitant about approaching God for forgiveness. It is never too late.

## **REFLECTION 2: RICH IN MERCY**

The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus invites us to delve deep to discover the message the evangelist John wishes to convey (John 3: 14-21). Nicodemus recognises Jesus as a rabbi/teacher meaning that he expects Jesus to be in line with the rabbis of the day. He understands Jesus as another of Moses’ disciples who preaches and performs signs. He comes late in the evening when it is dark so as to avoid being observed, especially from fellow rabbis. He is really puzzled by Jesus’ reference to being ‘born from above’.

Trying to explain, Jesus calls up memories of Moses. He refers to the time when God told Moses that snakes were doing God’s will by biting Israelites. So, to remedy the situation, God told Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and hold it up: God then saved the lives of all who looked at it. The symbol of this drama demonstrates that just as Moses could fashion a model of a snake, so God the Creator could control death and life. People can face what they most fear and not be overcome if they believe in God’s life-giving power. That leads us to Jesus’ explanation that the Son of Man is lifted up. But now, unlike the time of Moses, the action of the people is not just to see and be cured, but also to believe. The return will not be to a return to health but a movement to eternal life. The word ‘believe’ here can also be understood as ‘adhere’ indicating that to believe in the Son is to cling to him to the point of becoming one with Him; accepting the scandal of the crucifixion which confers eternal life. Jesus reveals God, the lover of humankind. God is not the death-dealer but the eternal life giver. All of Jesus’ emphasis is on God’s great love: the Son was sent by God to save the world. We are saved by adhering to the Son who grants eternal life.

God sends his Son so we can see with our own eyes what St. Paul teaches about in our second reading (Eph 2:1-10) today when he describes our God as being ‘rich in mercy’ when he describes you and me as being ‘brought to life in Christ’ and then he topped it off by telling each of us that we are ‘God’s handiwork’.

May God give us the grace this Lent to rediscover the depths of God’s love for us, especially those immersed in the pain of depression, in the hope that we can create a sense of mission in our society to bring an end to the tragedies of any future.