

The way to we know not where

On this 2nd Sunday of Lent we take leave of Matthew the Evangelist, to whom we will return later in the year, to travel through Lent in the rather different company of John. We do so through the conversations or encounters Jesus has with some key characters: key not because of who they are, but for what Jesus is able to reveal about himself through engaging with them. Next week it's the Samaritan woman at the well; the week after, the man born blind; then Martha and Mary at the raising of Lazarus. This week it is the Pharisee Nicodemus.

In the Revised Common lectionary, each one of the Gospel readings has been paired with a reading from the Old Testament. Sometimes the connection is fairly obvious: the woman at the well is coupled with water from the rock in the Exodus; the raising of Lazarus with Ezekiel's valley of dry bones; last week we heard how Eve and Adam gave into temptation, unlike Jesus in the wilderness. This week, unless I'm missing something, the link appears more abstract. The Lord calls on Abram to leave his home and kindred, all that is familiar to him from his 75 years of life, to travel to a land that God will show him; and where he will be blessed as the ancestor of a great nation.

I wonder how that invitation grabs us? Particularly if you are of a similar age? All of us undertake many journeys, physical and metaphorical, during our lives. Some of them become familiar: the journey to and from school or work: we know where we are going and how to get there. For other journeys we know the destination, but we have to work out the route: we want to qualify for a particular role or opportunity; we prepare to set up home, or for retirement. But the journey the Lord holds out to Abram is a journey into the unknown: it is to a land which God will show him. He sets out in faith with his flocks and herds, but with no destination or route map: only God's promise.

Journeys into the unknown can be attractive: we think of stories of the great explorers; or what inspires journeys into space. There are those who abandon one life track without a clear sense of what they are going to do next, but relishing the chance to explore. At a more mundane level you can book a mystery tour and see where it takes you. On the other hand, leaving the familiar behind to go you know not where can feel disorientating and scary. Some undertake such a journey only because they feel they have to: we think of refugees from conflict in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Is today's connection between Nicodemus and Abram that Nicodemus is also being invited to leave what is familiar to him, as a Pharisee and teacher of Israel, and to embark on a journey of faith for which he knows neither the destination nor the route? He comes to Jesus by night: he has been drawn by the light; but, in John's terms, he doesn't appear ready to leave the darkness. Twice he fails to comprehend what Jesus is saying to him. He misunderstands Jesus' requirement to be born from above as a ridiculous need to be born over again. John the Baptist's words to his disciples at the end of the chapter might well be an assessment of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus:

*The one who comes from above is above all;
the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things.
The one who comes from heaven is above all.
He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony.*

Nicodemus is earthbound in his thinking; characteristic of his fellow Pharisees, he fails to accept what Jesus has to say. Yet Jesus is the one who has descended from heaven and speaks of *what he knows* and of *what he has seen*.

We might have thought initially that Nicodemus was on the right track when he hailed Jesus as *a teacher who has come from God*. It is a step in the right direction; but, as a description which might be applied to any prophet (John the Baptist, for example) it's an inadequate appreciation of the Word become flesh; the Son of Man who descended from heaven.

The question of where Jesus came from appears to have been a significant one in the debate between Christian and non-Christian Jews. The second time Nicodemus appears in the Gospel, his fellow Pharisees are insistent that a prophet (or the prophet) would not come from Galilee. Jesus and his followers' northern origins were clear to their fellow Jews; as Matthew says, many labelled them as *Nazarenes*. Matthew and Luke's response was to promote traditions that Jesus actually originated from Bethlehem. John makes no attempt to imitate that: to him it doesn't matter where on earth Jesus was born: the truth is that he has come down from heaven into the world.

The only way to appreciate that is by the Spirit. It was the descent of the Spirit at Jesus' baptism which revealed to John the Baptist that Jesus was the coming one who would baptise with the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells Nicodemus that to see and enter the kingdom of God one needs to be *born of water and the Spirit*. Those born of the Spirit have something about them of the Spirit: *the wind blows where it wills ... but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes*.

Characteristic of the Pharisees and leaders of the Jews, Nicodemus can't get there by his own reasoning: he needs to be born from above. And maybe that is rather scary for him: a man with status within the religion of his people. He's being called to leave home to travel to he knows not where.

And that, implies John, is the call to any of us. We might not be Nicodemus. We might be the woman at the well, enticed by the prospect of something more life-giving than the water she fetches each day. We might be the man born blind, gaining both sight and, more importantly insight into who it is who has healed him. We might be Martha and Mary, wondering what Jesus has to offer in the face of the death of their brother. We might be Thomas, who, with characteristic honesty, asks Jesus, *We don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?*

To each of these, in different circumstances and different ways, Jesus replies that he is *the way*; he is *the resurrection and the life*; he is the source of true insight and *living water*; he is the one from who and in whom we receive the Spirit, to lift us from our earthbound state.

Some people are very definite in their faith about where they are going. For me, the journey of faith has more of the characteristics of a journey into the unknown – but a journey initiated by and accompanied by the one who is both the way and the destination; the one lifted up for us, in whom we find not only blessing, but eternal life.