

A priest entered a local tavern, three men were sitting at the bar. He asked the first, "Do you want to go to heaven?" The man said, yes, he did. The priest said, "Then go stand against the wall."

He asked the second if he wanted to go to heaven. The man said, yes, and the priest told him to stand against the wall. He asked the third, "And you, do you want to go to heaven?"

The man said, "no." The priest said, "What? When you die, you don't want to go to heaven?" The man said, "Well, yes, when I die. But I thought you were getting a group to go right now!"

Like many of those who approached Jesus, we all want the Kingdom – but not yet!

We have come to the third story in our trilogy about the Kingdom! We have considered Transfiguration and then Temptation over the past 2 Sundays and today our theme is TRUST, embodied in the patriarch, Abraham, the writings of St. Paul, and in a conversation between Jesus and the only Irishman mentioned in the bible Nick O'Demus (Nicodemus !!).

We hear God tell Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." And Abram said yes to God. Abram went. And not only did Abram go, but so did his nephew Lot and wife Sarai, despite their fear and doubt. Abram's response to God's call teaches to us to have faith when we discern God's gentle voice in our lives. We are to act with faith and go forward, even when it means embarking on a scary, uncharted course.

Having God's command, and submitting entirely to it, made Abraham the first great pilgrim. Henceforth all his activity took on the value of obedience to God; he was on the high road towards Yahweh, the living God. The same spirit would give the deepest meaning to our lives too. Far from being absurd or useless, the pilgrim's efforts to follow the gospel of his Master are full of meaning. Progress along this way is the real formula for peace of mind. Augustine said it profoundly: "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord; and our hearts can never be at rest, until they rest in You."

Through eyes of faith, we are pilgrims, like Abraham, moving toward the land of promise. Like St Paul, we try to deal with the problems and setbacks along the way, with the help of the Lord. And in the end, if we are faithful, we will share the total joy of joining Christ in glory, as the reward of life's pilgrimage. The pilgrims' sights are set high, and like Martin Luther King they can say: "I have a dream" However far-off and hard to

reach this dream may be, it is worth more than all the short-term desires we follow. Each step on the journey takes on meaning in light of the goal God sets before us.

Our whole life can be made a pilgrimage towards God. Just as he called Abraham, so he calls each of us to be his own. His call to us is quiet but insistent. Not exactly in the form of: “leave *your country and your father’s house*,” but “*leave your old ways*, the pride and selfishness, the hardness of heart, the angry temper, the envy and the falsehood. And go to the land I shall show”. The direction of our pilgrimage is not geographical but moral: “Go towards charity, purity, sharing in truth and prayer and good-will. Go in the way of the gospel. Go to heaven.’

The Rabbi, *Abraham Joshua Heschel* said of faith:

“Faith is not the clinging to a shrine but an endless pilgrimage of the heart.”

The whole story of Abraham is about his growing relationship with God grew from one of doubt into trust, through hardship and suffering to the point where he say that *all was as it should be* in God’s plan. That is something that is hard for us to accept. There was no doubt in Paul’s mind that that was the case.

Yes! It is sometimes hard to hear God’s message.

In our Gospel reading we heard the story of the Pharisee Nicodemus, coming to Jesus in the dark of night – a powerful leader, a member of the Sanhedrin in line just behind the High Priest, who comes to a peripatetic preacher in the darkness of night for illumination. Clearly he senses God in Jesus, yet he seems to have tremendous difficulty hearing and understanding Jesus’ new teachings as their conversation unfolds. Perhaps he is too rooted in the world, and with those things with which he is familiar, to hear Jesus’ radical new message of love that paves the way to eternal life.

As followers of Jesus, are we like Nicodemus? Coming to God from a place of darkness, yet being unable to hear Jesus’ call to new life? Are we, for whatever reason, choosing to stay in a place of darkness, hands over our ears like children, chanting, repeating, “I can’t hear you,”!

Fortunately, Jesus brings light to not only the darkness of our lives, but to the darkness of the world.

Nicodemus, a righteous man, came to Jesus deeply troubled. He reminds us of Isaiah: *"With my soul, have I desired thee in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek thee early: for when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness."* Both have been moved to express their deep hunger of their inner spirit.

Nicodemus had an inkling perhaps that Jesus might be the Messiah, he has seen miracles and healings. His position in life is challenged. But the little voice behind his ear keeps saying, "Be careful now; don't get taken in." He wants answers but, instead, all he finds is confusion. He fails to understand what Jesus was saying to him. He replies with an obvious meaning rather than digging deeper into what was being said.

Nicodemus would not rest until he found the truth. He wanted badly to understand, and he sensed that Jesus had the answer. After he became a follower, his life was changed forever. He never hid his faith in Jesus again. He stood up for Jesus when the Pharisees were conspiring against him: Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, "Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?" He also helped Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus' body down from the Cross and lay it in a tomb, at great risk to his safety and reputation.

The Greek name Nicodemus, (meaning conqueror in English), is closely related to the Greek words, which are translated in English as victory and overcome. Νικοδημος (*Nikodemos*) which meant "victory of the people" from Greek νικη (*nike*) "victory" and δημος (*demos*) "the people".

NICODEMUS - THE CONQUEROR BY FAITH

The name of this man Nicodemus, begins to take on very special meaning with the way in which our Lord called him to overcome, and partake of the spiritual victory in Christ.

Spiritual things are not grasped because of superior intelligence, because we are able to grasp some proposition of Ludwig Wittgenstein. *"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are*

folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned"

When Jesus told Nicodemus that the remedy for his need was to be "born again" he took the allusion to birth literally, because he is still thinking in terms of something he can achieve. Think of the "wind," Jesus says to him. "You cannot command it to come; all you can do is to feel it when it blows. The new birth is like that! You cannot command it to occur by something you do; you must resign yourself to doing nothing and let God do this work in you." The solution to our native darkness is God's ability to transform us. All we can do is cry for mercy and ask him to change us, cleanse us.

All of this is alluded to in our scripture and our worship – our religion. It just requires a response from us.

Frederick Buechner, who I quoted last week, says this
"Religion points to that area of human experience [where](#) in one way or another man comes upon mystery as a summons to pilgrimage."

That summons calls for trust, and the courage to step out in faith on a journey to a Kingdom which is not "of this world," which requires a "new birth from above" as the beginning of the Christian experience, and it involves spiritual enlightenment, or "change of perspective." We cannot understand or accept this without the help of the Spirit of God.

It is not a dream. The mystery is that we are already there!

*Acknowledgements
Ben Helmer
Suzanne E. Watson*