

“Not To Condemn The World” – John 3:1-17 – Lent 2 – Mar 20, 2011

It was saddening this week to watch TV. It was saddening not just because of the mind-bending extent of the tragedy in Japan, or the struggles in Libya, but saddening also to see how easily bogus opinions could be so quickly and so widely represented as factual news. The horrifying pictures of the devastating tsunami in Japan and its devastating effects on the lives of thousands of individual people had barely started to show on our TV screens before horribly insensitive people started to proclaim that this act of nature was somehow God’s retribution on the Japanese people. Sadly too the sick jokes began, and that short, obnoxious comedian who was the voice of the Aflack duck was summarily fired for a joke that was in very poor taste. Religious fanatics, once again revealing that they have no sense of humour, freely offered almost gleeful proclamations of divine doom and righteous retribution. It’s more than too bad that these self-righteous fanatics have completely missed the whole point of God’s incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

In this age of global communication that is unprecedented in human history, not only the news of disaster can spread all over the planet in real time, but various and sundry forms of misinformation, disinformation, and outright mental trash can spread at the same rate. I don’t mean just the deliberate disinformation – read “outright lies” – pumped out by politicians, governments, corporations, advertising agencies, activist groups, and yes – even churches, but we’ve moved into an era – ironically called an “age of Reason” – in which even the most irrational and illogical dumb ideas receive both instant credibility but unbelievably wide acceptance. If you think I’m exaggerating, simply look at the run on Potassium Iodide that has emptied store shelves here in a panic over the possibility of nuclear fallout here on the West Coast. People are buying, and probably using, a chemical that is only effective in cases of extremely high radiation dosage, and that is positively harmful if taken otherwise. The radiation we can expect here is a mere fraction of the dosage you would get on an airplane flight to Toronto! It’s clear that somehow the wrong messages are being heeded, and the right messages aren’t even getting through!

And even though it is easy to blame the media – and it is really easy to do so! – even a face-to-face encounter is still not a guarantee of good, clear and effective communication. Sometimes we simply smile and nod to indicate understanding and to mask the fact that we have no clue what the other has just said. But this phenomenon of misunderstanding through bad communication is nothing new. Lack of comprehension or just plain misunderstanding were at least as common in Jesus’ day as they are now. Education and training not only don’t necessarily make things better, sometimes they are a disadvantage! For an example, take a peek at that conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus that we just read.

John tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, so we know that he was as highly educated as anyone could have been in those days, schooled and proficient in Scripture, Theology and even Law. This Nicodemus was no fool. He was even smart enough to approach Jesus secretly, “under cover” so to speak, which is a better understanding of the word translated “at night”. He was astute enough to understand that if his declaration to Jesus, “you are from God”, were to be leaked to the press there would be a mighty uproar, and he would even lose his cushy teaching job.

Even with that declaration, Nicodemus still didn’t completely understand who Jesus was, and the role he had come to play. Jesus, in good rabbinical style, toyed with him at an intellectual level, calling for birth “from above”, which Nicodemus hears as being physically born “again”. Jesus reveals his ‘gotcha’ of Nicodemus by going on to explain the nature of what

he meant by a birth “from above”, a new life born of the waters of baptism and the Holy Spirit. It is pretty clear from Nicodemus’ answer, “how can this be?”, that he still didn’t get it, that he still didn’t understand, and so he went on his way still confused.

We shouldn’t be too hard on poor old Nicodemus in his confusion, for he would not be the only one, because the confusion over this issue would last a long, long time. Some confusion certainly lasted at least until the time John wrote his gospel, because in order to help clear things up he added part of a later, post-Easter sermon to try to explain what Jesus meant. Note that at verse 7 the text shifts from the singular “you / I” of the Jesus and Nicodemus conversation to the plural “you / we” of a larger (and later) audience, now linking Christian baptism with the Holy Spirit, and referring to Christ’s ascension as a past event.

Thus a covert, in-the-cover-of-darkness conversation between two individuals moves to a presentation of two widely divergent perspectives on life before God. One perspective understands faith as the acting out of proof texts, following prescribed behaviours, displaying defined patterns of faithful obedience on a long and arduous climb into the kingdom of God. The other insists that life in the kingdom is a gift given by God, unobtainable any other way than by accepting the gift, a gift not controlled by humans but instead blown to and fro by the Holy Spirit of God. As the theologian Fred Craddock puts it, “the shift from succeeding at religion to having eternal life [given freely] is as radical as being born anew.”

But the message itself is not new. God’s grace is not something new, as though He had somehow mellowed over the ages. His grace was evident even in ancient times, as early as the defining moment of the Exodus. It is important to remember that God delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt first – then afterwards presented the Law through Moses. This text in John’s gospel proclaims what has always been true of God, and what is comforting again: God loves the world; God desires that none perish; God gives the Son that all may live; God has acted in Christ not to condemn but to save.

The burning question that still hangs in the air after Nicodemus’ confused exit is, then, what does this new life look like? The furor and heated dialogue about whether the rebirth with water and the Spirit is ‘again’ or ‘from above’ is a futile and meaningless diversion. The real question is, what does this new life look like?

And to that question, unfortunately for some avid groups, there is no one single ‘right’ answer. There is no divine cookie-cutter that stamps out certified, genuine rebirthed Christians. The gifts of the Spirit are given in as many ways as there are people, and the tasks to which we are called in the Spirit are as varied as the personalities that respond. There are some common characteristics that are displayed in this new life in the Spirit, and they are recognized as the results, as the fruit of the Spirit. While Paul says to the congregation at Galatia, “the works of the flesh are obvious ...”, he continues, “by contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

We see evidence of this contrast and change in Nicodemus’ life. Where initially he goes away from this first encounter with Christ confused and uncertain, later we see him later arguing that Jesus deserved to be treated fairly under the law and receive a hearing (this after Jesus had upset people in the temple). Even later we see the change is complete in Nicodemus as he helps Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus’ body for burial. Big changes in Nicodemus, from righteous Pharisee to faithful Christian.

That change is a superb example of what God’s incarnation in Christ was all about – namely about new life, about moving to a life that was filled with positive growth, and abundance, and acceptance, and love. A change that was underscored by the verse that people so

often forget – John 3:17 – that Christ came “not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Not to condemn: not to write the world off as unsaveable; not to hit some kind of cosmic “system reboot”; not to toss all the world into a fiery dungeon; but to rescue the world. Rescue the world from what? From the pain and agony that people cause to other people through rejection, minimizing, scorning, oppressions of all kinds – political, social, economic, psychological, physical, and yes – religious. That is the wrap-up, the recap, the summary of this piece of scripture, that God’s redeeming and reconciling act in Christ Jesus was to save the world, not to trash it.

And with that understanding and perspective, how do we move forward in our faith? We do so in ways that are consistent with that message of reconciliation instead of condemnation, with acceptance replacing judgment, with justice overruling oppression, with loving kindness drowning out dismissal, with service to others in Christ’s name being the visible signal of a message from God of reconciliation instead of condemnation.