

**A CONVERSATION WITH JESUS
(SERMON AS GUIDED MEDITATION)**

Sermon for Lent 2A-Jn3:1-17

LPC, 3/12/17

We all know all about Jesus, don't we? We know all about how he came to save the world, and how he offers us eternal life, forgives our sins and receives us into the company of heaven when we die. But we still have questions, at least from time to time.

Suppose you were given a chance to visit Jesus and ask him your questions. These could be general questions about the meaning of life, or they could be questions arising from an acute situation, where you want to ask Jesus, "Why is this happening?" or "What should I do next?"

Actually you do have a chance to ask Jesus your questions. It's called prayer. I don't know whether you actually kneel beside your bed at night to say your prayers. (I don't, owing to an absence of cartilage in my knees!) But next time you enter into a period of intentional prayer it might be interesting to conceive of your prayer session as a visit to Jesus by night, along the lines of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night.

People who do a lot of guided meditation will ask you at this point to supply some detail from your own imagination to the picture in your mind of this encounter with Jesus. Using your imagination to enter into the scripture is a time-honored way to study the Bible, a method of Bible study and meditation particularly endorsed by St. Ignatius Loyola. I have found that this technique appeals to some people more than others, so don't force yourself, this is just an introduction, an experiment.

But the way this works is to imagine the setting in which you encounter Jesus: what you see, hear, smell and feel; whether there is a taste in your mouth; the quality of light; the furniture. How are you feeling? What do you expect?

Then your conversation begins. You start by recognizing that Jesus has some kind of authority, just as Nicodemus does. Nicodemus credits Jesus with authority on the basis of the signs Jesus has done.

In your imaginary night-time visit with Jesus, acknowledge, as Nicodemus does, that Jesus has particular access to the presence of God. Here is where you can pose your question, if you have one. Then hear what Jesus says to you.

Hear Jesus say, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Now, you may have heard that translated, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again," or "born anew." The original Greek here has connotations of all three. The commentaries say that this ambiguity is intentional, and that the exclusive rendering required by there being no precise English equivalent results in the translation necessarily being skewed unless you consciously try to keep in mind the layers of meaning here that exceed the power of the English language to communicate.

At any rate, if you consider this as an answer to your question it's pretty weird. You are probably fairly confused by this, just like Nicodemus, so, like him, you ask for clarification.

This time Jesus answers you with this talk of being born of water and the Spirit, and the comparison of the movement of the Spirit to the movement of the wind.

By now you have probably fully identified with Nicodemus and his mystification. But resolve to take these things and ponder them in your heart. Simply accept that the Spirit moves in a mysterious way. We can't see the movement of the Spirit, although we can see and feel its effects.

Does this begin to make just a little bit of sense? Nicodemus has begun with an off-hand bit of flattery, the likes of which were common in oriental culture when addressing an authoritative person. Nicodemus probably doesn't attach a lot of significance to his comment that Jesus is clearly close to God. But Jesus does. Jesus's purpose is to bring *everyone* close to God, so he uses Nicodemus' flattery to preach about God's nearness, but also about God's mystery.

Approaching God is not as simple as fulfilling a bunch of commandments. Approaching God, according to John, is about believing. But how do you believe in something you cannot see? Well, nobody can see the wind, but nobody doubts its existence, because we see and feel its effects. Barring some inexplicable mental block, it's impossible not to believe in wind. Likewise we see and feel the effects of the Spirit of God. That is enough reason to believe in God, just as we believe in the unseen wind.

When we, with Nicodemus, question Jesus further, he branches out a bit, speaking of ascent and descent, and comparing his own salvific ascent to the time Moses, as related by the book of Numbers, raised a brass serpent above the people of Israel to save them from the effects of poisonous snakebite. But there is multiple meaning here too, because Jesus is not talking just about being raised as king, he is also talking about being raised as a criminal on a cross. Jesus is here identifying exaltation with his humiliating and miserable execution.

This is perhaps the most confusing thing of all, and understandable only in light of what we know of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. And in light of what Jesus says next, "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."

The commentator I consulted for this sermon warned against trying too hard to understand all of this typically circular Johannine language, but insisted that the point is not to fully comprehend what Jesus says, but to encounter Jesus, as Nicodemus did. We come to Jesus often for answers, and often we don't get answers per se. We get Jesus himself, God's own gift of salvation and abundant life. That may be confusing, but in the end, the love we get from Jesus is more lasting than specific answers ever could be.

So that is one way to initiate an encounter with Jesus, using a scriptural account of an encounter with Jesus. Jesus is known best in encounter.