

I spent Monday morning this week at the federal courthouse. I was part of a group called the Faith Team who accompany immigrants as they go through the system down there. And as we gathered at the start of the shift, the team leader pointed at me and said, "Well, you're recognizably religious. You can go and stand in this prominent place over there." I'd like to think she called me that because of some sort of aura of holiness, some spiritual fragrance that was around me, but sadly, I think it was because I was wearing my clerical shirt.

And I found the corridor in the federal courthouse a great place to pray. I meditated on what it means to be religious. How is belief manifested in our lives? And I reflected on the readings that we have for today, which say a lot about faith and belief. And there's an interesting contrast in our readings. St. Paul, in the Epistle to Romans, notes that Abraham believed God. And Jesus in the gospel asked Nicodemus, "Why do you not believe?" Two figures who represent to us different ways of coming to faith, different ways of believing. Stark contrast, Abraham and Nicodemus.

So, I want to say something about these two contrasting characters and what they can teach us about the nature of belief and what it means to be recognizably religious.

Abraham is a revered figure in the three great monotheistic faith traditions in the world, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. And he's honored in all three as the father of many nations. And in all three traditions, it's his faith and the strength of his belief that's admired. About 4,000 years ago, Abraham was living in a place called Ur, which is now in a land we call Iraq, and he hears God saying to him, "Go from your country and all that's familiar to you." And Abraham went. He doesn't ask any questions. He doesn't ask for time to think about it. The text simply says, "So Abraham went." He sets out and he sets out not knowing where he's going, let alone why he's going. The call was simply to head off into the unknown. And in so doing, Abraham goes against so much that comes... Well, we know as human nature, his journey was from the familiar to the unknown, from the safe and the

secure to the unpredictable and the strange. He journeyed from present clarity to a future of profound ignorance.

The New Testament writer to the Hebrews says this, "By faith, Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance obeyed and went. Even though he did not know where he was going. By faith, he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country." St. Paul puts it more succinctly: "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed." Abraham's response to God's call on him was big, bold, and brave.

And then we come to Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a highly educated, religious leader, and he comes to Jesus at night on his own. It would appear that he'd been intrigued by something he'd heard Jesus say. He'd heard Jesus teach, he wanted to know more, and his opening gambit to Jesus is friendly. He says, "Jesus, we know you're a teacher who has come from God." But Jesus responds in a way that takes the conversation in a totally different direction. Jesus says to Nicodemus, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." A statement that's completely beyond Nicodemus' comprehension. He's no idea what Jesus is talking about. "How can this be?", he says. "Can someone enter a second time into their mother's womb?"

Now, one might think that Nicodemus here is mocking Jesus, that he's being sarcastic, but remember he's come on his own. There's no crowd for him to play to. I don't think he is being sarcastic. It's just that Nicodemus has absolutely no idea what Jesus is talking about. Whereas Abraham jumps straight in, Nicodemus is more circumspect. He needs time to consider what Jesus is saying. And he does get there in the end. He does reappear a couple of times in the gospels. He's there most significantly at the crucifixion. It's Nicodemus is one of the people who takes Jesus's body down off the cross and gives it an appropriate burial. So, we can assume he got there. He came to faith in the end. And he comes across in this story as a pragmatist. Nicodemus is a cautious literalist.

He's preoccupied and can't get over what he knows to be possible.

The word "can" appears nine times in this passage. Nicodemus struggles to get past what he knows can be done and what can't be done. Jesus is talking about heavenly things and Nicodemus recognizes the words, but he can't grasp what they mean. And I think when Nicodemus asked Jesus, "How can a man be born again when he is old?" I think there's a wistfulness in his voice. He's saying, "I can see that that's necessary. I can see it's desirable, but in my experience, it's impossible." It's not the desirability of being reborn, of having that fresh start that Nicodemus is questioning. It's simply the mechanics that troubled him.

But as I said, Nicodemus does get there in the end. He does come to faith in Jesus. Though I suggest that if he was on the way home that night after talking with Jesus and the penny dropped and Nicodemus got it, it wasn't because he was so smart that he worked out what Jesus was saying. He didn't suddenly think, "Oh yes, that's logical. That makes sense. Now I believe."

He didn't think these things through in his mind and arrive at the conclusion. Jesus makes it clear in the passage that faith doesn't come as a result of us thinking, of working it out, of reducing faith to a formula that's logical, that we can understand.

Faith is always a gift. It's a miracle. The penny drops. We get it. We're born again. "The wind of the Spirit blows where it chooses", Jesus says. Nicodemus had to come to the realization that believing in Jesus wasn't simply an intellectual exercise. Faith is never just assenting to various doctrines or intellectual beliefs. We're never going to be able to get there by working it all out.

Faith isn't assenting to a collection of propositions. Believing in the Bible, having faith in Jesus is not simply having an opinion. To believe comes from the German word, *belieben*. *Belieben*, which is to love. To believe is to treasure. To hold something beloved. To believe is to invest in something with my love. The new life to which we're called is a life lived in relationship with God. Jesus invites us to be

born again into that new relationship, to live in love and trust of Him. And it's a relationship which lasts beyond the grave. The life which Jesus called Nicodemus to, that he calls all of us to, is an eternal life. And Lent, the season in which we now find ourselves, is a time to reflect on our spiritual life, to ask big questions. Are we more of a Nicodemus or an Abraham? Where are we on our spiritual journey?

Are we like Nicodemus in this story, still asking how can this be? Or are we at the stage like Abraham where we're ready to jump in, to follow God wherever it may lead? Can we feel the wind of the spirit blowing on us? How is faith manifested in our life? Might we be said to be recognizably religious? And let's find time in this season of Lent to be quiet, to reflect on those big questions. Amen.