

Sometimes I really miss my lovely son Jacob, who lives in Denver, and I just want to catch up, find out what's going on in his life, catch up with the English soccer scene. I don't know. So, I just give him a call. Invariably, after about 45 seconds, he'll say to me, "Is there a purpose to this call?" And I have to admit, there really isn't. And I know he gets this impatience from me because I too hate speaking on the phone. I just think, "Tell me what you got to tell me, we'll agree and then be done with it."

So you can understand my dismay this week when a friend caught me on the phone. It must be a moment of weakness. I think I was a bit lonely. Laura was out of town, and we got talking and I opened up and started chatting away in a most uncharacteristic manner. After several minutes, I realized that my friend wasn't actually on the end of the line, and I'd been talking to myself for several minutes. I hope that the phone went dead. I hope that's what happened, rather than he put the phone down out of boredom. But either way, I found myself talking to myself for several minutes, and I thought of that experience when I read the Gospel set for today. It starts off as a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. There's a back and forth between the two, but if you look closely, you'll see it turns eventually into a monologue, and it's just Jesus speaking, and Nicodemus has disappeared.

Maybe his phone went dead. I don't know. But the last thing that Nicodemus says is, "How can this be?" And then he disappears from the conversation. And it's just Jesus and a monologue. And as far as we can read, Nicodemus is left in his confusion and bewilderment. That's where the story ends. And to be honest, Nicodemus had much to be confused about. There's some dense teaching going on in this passage. So rather than tackle all of it, I'm going to speak about one verse. And you won't be surprised to know which verse it is, perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he sent his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." 27 words that we're all very familiar with.

And what I'd realized when I looked at that verse again this week is that it contains, well, it hinges on two pairs of words. One pair has to do with God, the other pair has to do with us. So, the first pair is this, "God so loved the world that he gave, that whoever believes may have eternal life." So, in short, loving and giving, believing and life.

I want to say something first about that first pair, God loves and gives. God so loved the world that he gave. The first thing we could say about God is that God is love, and that it's a giving kind of love. God is love. And what's

distinctive about Christian teaching and the Christian understanding of God is that we see God as made up of relationships of love between three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

We worship a God who is family, who is community, who is a network of loving relationships that we call Trinity. That's distinctive to a Christian understanding of God. God is love. And it's not that God created the world because he had nothing to love before the world was created. Because before the world was even created, God was in perfect communion with the Trinity. He created the world to share in that love. And it's important to remember this notion of the Trinity in this context because we see that in Jesus Christ, God gave of himself. It's not that God so loved the world that he sent a very important delegate on his behalf to represent his views.

God so loved the world that he sent Jesus. He came as the person of Jesus. He came in the form of humanity. What we're talking about today is not delegation. It's self-giving. God gave of himself in the person of Christ Jesus. So, God is love and it's a giving, self-giving kind of love. And note too the object of God's love. It's not the ones he likes or even his chosen people or the ones who do the right thing. The object of God's love is the world, the cosmos in the original Greek. There's an unimaginable depth and scale to God's love. God so loved the world.

It's an enormous incomprehensible kind of love. And yet, note the scale of it, but also the fact that it's for individuals. We read this amazing verse in the Book of Romans where Paul writes this: "For I'm convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Nothing can separate us from God's love. We gathered here, us individually. We are incorporated in God's enormous, broad, incomprehensible love. It's a personal kind of love, a relational love which extends to each one of us. We here this morning are Gods beloved, loved by God, who reaches to each one of us, takes the initiative, not because so much we are lovable, but because he is love.

So let me move on to the second pair of words that we find in this great verse. How do we respond to God's love and self-giving? We are called to believe and have life. And this response, this call to believe, looks different in every kind of person in each one of us. We all respond to God and his love for us in different ways. Just look at the readings that we had today. The first one was about Abram, or Abraham as he was to become. God says to him, "Go from your country. Leave behind all your friends,

your family, everything you know, and go to the land that I will show you." And Abraham doesn't question him. He doesn't ask for time to think about it. We're told he simply went as the Lord told him. And this straightforward, uncomplicated, immediate response is so different to what we read about in the Gospel with Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was much more measured, more circumspect. He didn't jump in with an emotional response. He wanted time to think, to grapple with what Jesus was saying to him. And he did get there in the end because he reappears in John's gospel as the one who takes Jesus' body off the cross and makes sure he gets a proper burial. But he didn't rush there. There's no patron saint of Episcopalians as far as I know. But if there was, I think Nicodemus would be a great candidate. He's our kind of guy, so let's look at him a bit more. He was a rationalist. Look at how he replies to Jesus when Jesus says to him, "You must be born again." "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" he says. Why does he say that?

Is it because he's stupid? I don't think so because we know he is a well-educated teacher. Does he want to make Jesus look stupid? Well, I don't think so because there's nobody else there, and he's come at night because he's a genuine seeker who wants to find out what Jesus is talking about. I think he asked that question because he simply doesn't understand or get it.

Nicodemus comes across in this passage as a pragmatist. He's a cautious literalist, preoccupied with what he knows to be possible. The word "can" appears nine times in the passage. Nicodemus is caught up in what can be done and what can't be done. Jesus is talking about heavenly things, and Nicodemus isn't on that plane. He recognizes the words but can't recognize what they mean. I think when Nicodemus asks Jesus, "How could a man be born again when he is old?" there's a wistfulness in his voice. He wants to know. He wants to understand. He maybe, himself, wants to be born again, but he can't see how he can get there. It's not the desirability of being born again that Nicodemus questions, it's the mechanism. How can this be? How can it happen? That's what troubles him.

And if somehow on the way home from this encounter, the penny drops and Nicodemus gets it, if suddenly his eyes are opened and he has that experience of being born again into the new life that Jesus was talking about, it didn't come as a prize. He wasn't being rewarded for asking sensible questions or for his religious education. It wasn't because of that. It wasn't because he was smart. It wasn't because he'd earned it. It was because this wind of the spirit had blown across him, that he'd been touched by

God's spirit and that he'd had that miraculous, supernatural new birth that Jesus was talking about.

Nicodemus had to come to the realization that believing isn't an intellectual exercise. It's not convincing ourselves that something is true. It's not an exercise in logic. Faith, belief isn't simply assenting to a collection of doctrines. Believing in the Bible, in the biblical sense, is not about having an opinion. The word "believe" comes from the German word "belieben" which means to love. To believe is to treasure, to hold something beloved. To believe in something is to invest it with my love, to respond to a loving encounter.

The new life to which we are called is a life lived in relationship with God. That's what belief is. It's experiencing that knowledge of being loved by God and loving him in return, of being born again by the Spirit. Jesus invites us to be born again, to come into that relationship of love and trust. And that's a relationship that continues beyond the grave. When we talk about eternal life, we're talking about that relationship that we can get a taste of here, coming to a full fruition after we've died.

John's gospel is very clear that the eternal life, the gift which Jesus promises, is something that can begin now. And what happens to us after death is a continuity, a flowering, a flourishing of that relationship that we can get a sense of now, that begins when we are born again. And Lent is a time to reflect on our own spiritual life. Do we have a sense of what it means to love God in return, to be touched by His spirit, to be born again? How do we respond to the God who reaches out to us in love? Are we more like Abraham or are we more like Nicodemus? Where are we on our spiritual journey? Are we like Nicodemus asking, "How can this be?" Or are we at the stage like Abraham, when we are ready to follow God's lead, wherever that might be? Can we feel the wind of the spirit blowing on us?

And let us find time this Lent to ponder those big, deep questions. That's what the season of Lent calls us to. It's more than giving up chocolate. It's being quiet. It's coming before God in all honesty, and asking those big questions, pondering them. So I invite you in this season of Lent to reflect on those big important questions which this Gospel raises. Amen.