

16th March, 2014.

Reading: John 3: 1 – 17

Sermon: Fear of the Light

On Wednesday afternoon I went along to the Screen Machine to see Philemena which on one level is the story of a mother's search for her child, a child she had out of wedlock in Ireland and who was sold by the convent to a wealthy American couple when he was two or three years old.

The shame Philemina bore throughout her life because she fell pregnant was something she kept secret for 50 years. Her shame was kept a secret as was the fact that she had borne a child before she married and had her daughter.

It was only when Philemina had the courage to admit to having had her son, it was only then that so many other secrets came to light, secrets which were far more shameful than a young girl falling pregnant.

Philemina was tortured throughout her life by her memories and by the way she was treated at the time she had her child. Despite her Catholic faith or I might even say, because of her Catholic faith, Philemina lived in a world of darkness because she was too scared to step into the light of day and be the person she was, a broken woman who had made one mistake as a young girl, a mistake for which her Church had punished her for fifty years and yet she forgave the nuns.

Fear is crippling, fear of what others might think of us if they really knew us, fear of what others might say or do if we were entirely honest with them about who we are or about some aspect of our lives. And it always saddens me when people keep a secret which cripples them because they fear what we as Christians might say or do.

The Church is the one place where people ought to be able to be honest about everything in their lives and still find acceptance and love. If only that were the case. If only people could step out into the light and out of the dark, crippling world of secrecy and shame but they can't because of a fear of being judged by you and by me.

What right have we got to pass judgement on anyone, we who along with the rest of the human race caused Jesus to be crucified. We are reminded of our shame and of our pardon in our closing hymn:

Died he for me, who caused his pain?

For me, who him to death pursued?

What right have we got to judge anyone particularly when we have never walked in their shoes?

In our Bible reading today, we see Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a man who had dedicated his entire life to studying God's Law and obeying every jot and tittle of it as it had been interpreted by the Scribes. We see this man, Nicodemus, coming to Jesus under the cover of darkness.

There was a belief among the rabbis that the best time to study the Law was at night because then it was quiet and there would be no interruptions. Maybe that is why Nicodemus came to Jesus once it was dark to discuss matters of faith and life. There would be no crowds around him and there would be no interruptions but if that was the reason, was it the only reason?

I think not. Nicodemus would very likely have been afraid to come to Jesus except under the cover of darkness. Nicodemus was part of the Sanhedrin, the court which ruled over the Jews and which was responsible for examining and dealing with all false prophets. To have been seen speaking to one whom they Sanhedrin considered to be a false prophet would have been shameful and probably life threatening.

It is easy to judge Nicodemus for creeping around in the dark but what right have we to do so? We have never walked in his shoes.

He came under the cover of darkness but he came looking for light. He came to Jesus seeking to understand and the way that we gain understanding is by questioning and by discussing.

Jesus made a statement. He told Nicodemus he had to be born again. Nicodemus failed to understand and so he questioned Jesus about that statement. Jesus gave a further explanation which was even more complicated and Nicodemus questioned him again. He sought clarity at every turn in the discussion because he wanted to understand. He wanted to come out of the darkness and into the light.

But let's look for a moment at that statement made by Jesus. **You must be born again.** Willie Barclay says that the word which is translated as 'again' in our Bible actually has three meanings in the Greek. It can mean:

From the beginning, completely radically.

For the second time.

From above and therefore, from God.

Willie Barclay says it not possible for us to get all three meanings into any English word but they are all there in the Greek and therefore in the phrase 'born again'.

To be born again is to undergo such a radical change that it is like a new birth; it is to have something happen to the soul which can only be described as being born all over again; and the whole process is not a human achievement, because it comes from the grace and power of God. So writes Willie Barclay.

And Jesus says: **No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the spirit.**

We have to undergo such a radical change to enter the kingdom of God, and that change is brought about in us by God through us believing in his Son.

John writes that **whoever believes in Jesus shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**

As a Church, we need to send out that message. Shame and condemnation are not part of God's kingdom. God's kingdom is about love and acceptance, about grace and mercy.

God's heart must break when he sees how we treat other people, when he sees how we judge others, when he sees how we condemn.

If we are born again, we should reflect only light in our lives, light which allows people to be themselves, to come as they are. It should allow us to come as we are and know that we will be loved and accepted.

We're all going to get it wrong at times but if we cause anyone to feel shame we need to come back to Jesus in the light of day or even under the cover of darkness to seek his help in understanding where we are going wrong so that we can then go on and live in the light.

What was important was not whether Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of darkness or in the light of day. What mattered was that he came and the same is true of us. What matters is that we come to Jesus, that we seek to understand his words, that we question and seek answers so that we can gain understanding and know his saving power in our lives.