

## **Gospel of John: Close Encounters of the First Kind**

*Session #2: Jesus encounters Nicodemus*

*Thursday, October 9, 2008*

As those of you who were here last week noticed,  
we did not get far in the reading of the Prologue of John: 5 verses.  
Oops!!!!

Fortunately, it is not about getting *far* but rather about getting *deep*.  
Because this “mini-series” is to be an exploration  
of a few of the encounters of Jesus in the Gospel of John,  
this evening it is my *intention* to move on

to the first of the encounters I wish to explore.  
Before doing so, however, I would like to uncover a few more  
hopefully interesting things in the Prologue,  
one of which serves as a nice springboard to this first encounter.

In the Prologue, John reveals to us three covenants that God establishes.  
In our reading of the Prologue, we may not realize this.  
Now, somebody asked me where I get these interpretations  
of what we are reading.

Firstly, we inherit an amazing patrimony in the church.  
We dialogue with the saints and the great minds of the church.  
And so, I personally confront the text as intelligently  
and as lovingly as possible,  
and then I make an appointment that some of these minds.

One of these minds is a French Dominican priest  
who died in 2006 and under whom I had the privilege of studying.  
In my opinion he is nothing short of amazing.  
His name is Father Marie-Dominique Philippe.  
I take many of his intuitions and try to run with them in my own little way.

Let us move to verse 9 of the Prologue.

*verse 9:*

**“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. “**

This is an amazing, seemingly overlooked verse.

What is revealed is the first of three covenants (again: all in the Prologue)  
between the Word (and thus God) and humanity.

A covenant is a special point of contact, a special place of “bonding”

The true light enlightens *every* one.

Beyond the simple rapport of creation,

every human mind has been touched by the Logos.

Every human mind is thus made for God, its source.

Every human mind has an appetite for God, and will only rest in God,  
in the Beatific Vision.

Our minds are sacred.

Tell yourself this when you are getting headache reading the instructions  
on how to assemble the new remote-controlled blender.

“Be still dear mind; know that you are destined for so much more.”

*Verse 11:*

**“He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him.”**

The second covenant is one established with a people, a people *chosen*.

*Verse 14: “and the Word became flesh”*

The third covenant is in Christ, in the Second Person of the Trinity become human, the most explicit and most intimate covenant.

And so we have

- a first natural covenant between the Word and the human mind
- a second covenant with believers through the Law
- a third covenant in the person of Jesus, the Word become flesh.

“Become flesh” means “come closer”, which means a *new* covenant.

A covenant is not simply a deal that makes.

A covenant, a divine covenant is God’s initiative, and is understood in looking at what God takes hold of and binds Himself, and to which He promises to be faithful..

“Become flesh” means a covenant with the whole of who we are.

The God-man, full of grace, takes hold of all we are.

That is why there will be the resurrection of the body as well.

We must, by the way, love our bodies.

Our sensitivity, our senses, are good because

- made by the Creator
- embraced and destined for glory by the Redeemer.

One day, post-resurrection of the body, we will all be  
—as Parish Hilton says—*hot!*

And what will be amazing is that our body will perfectly manifest our soul,  
will perfectly manifest what is spiritual in us.

Now, as we journey, such is not always the case.

Our body sometimes ails what is spiritual in us.

### **“and the Word became flesh”**

The *Logos* took to Himself, “assumed” flesh, that which is physical  
and thus can waste away and thus is fragile.

That is how far God goes in his embrace  
—so that our whole person participates in his life.

If the *Logos*, God, takes flesh to Himself, then,  
from the moment of His conception, He is, in a sense, the Resurrection.

The resurrection entails participation of that which can waste away  
in eternal life.

Of course, after Jesus rises from the dead,  
the participation is definitive and complete,  
but it begins at/with the Incarnation.

God allowed Jesus to die so to communicate his love mysteriously  
through his death.

The immediate consequence of this third covenant, of the Incarnation,  
is that “he dwelt among us”.

The original expression or “dwelt” is literally “pitched his tent”.

How *real*!

The *Logos* pitched his tent, settled down, made his home.

- in Mary
- in our midst
- in us

The Old Covenant was more God “passing through”.

The New Covenant—*our* covenant—is more God “staying”.

Consider and contrast these two:

- the tablets of the law, symbols of the presence of God
- the Eucharist, the perfect fruit of the Incarnation, the presence of God

It is here that we see what is unique in Christianity.

God takes the initiative to come close and becomes human.

It is insane!

It is awesome!

***Verse 14*** continues: “**And we have seen his glory**”.

What is glory?

The overflow—which leads to the communication of—God’s life,  
which is a life of love and light.

In Jesus is made manifest the life of God.

As we read in Colossians 1:19:

“In him all the fullness was pleased to dwell.”

Verses 12 and 13 speak to us of our participation by grace in the divine life, made possible because the Word became flesh, This participation, and the rebirth that occurs when we are granted it, is further articulated in an amazing encounter, the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus in Chapter 3. Let us, therefore, move to Chapter 3.

After the purification in the temple, John underscores that, during Jesus' stay in Jerusalem, many came to believe in him. One person particularly intrigued by Jesus, intrigued by the signs that led many to believe was a certain *Nicodemus*.

***Verse 1* “There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews”**

Nicodemus was not your average guy. He was a Pharisee. a ruler of the Jews, one of the elders. Nicodemus was thus a man of status and religious stature, who was surely much older than Jesus.

***Verse 2* “He came to Jesus at night”.**

Nicodemus' coming to Jesus is humbling, but he is being true to

- the healthy curiosity of his mind
- perhaps the something stirring in his heart.

He must be prudent, however.

He comes *at night* (remember, no detail is insignificant).

Nicodemus must be prudent.

He is not sure who Jesus really is  
and he cannot risk problems with the other elders.  
Moreover, in order to find out who Jesus is, he needs

- some “face time”
- a one-on-one conversation.

The apostles may be present but their not being mentioned suggests they are not an impediment to the intimacy between Nicodemus. Nicodemus comes at night, and Jesus welcomes him. Jesus does not say “I have closed shop until tomorrow. It is way too late.” Keep this in mind: with Jesus the “shop” is always open...

**Verse 2 continues “and said to him ‘Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can perform these signs that you are performing unless God is with him’”.**

Nicodemus calls Jesus “Rabbi”.

It is quite an amazing greeting,  
especially since Jesus is not officially a Rabbi.

Jesus did not attend rabbinic school.

Nicodemus quite simply and quite humbly acknowledges  
the wisdom of Jesus, beyond any questions of specific training.

With perhaps a vague sense, but nonetheless,

Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus is somehow sent, is somehow on a mission.

“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Amen, Amen I say to you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above’.”

Jesus response is no less amazing.

Jesus does not say “Well, thank you very much, that is very kind of you.

I am actually sent. I am on quite the mission. You sensed correctly.”

There is no complement—or so it seems in Jesus’—response.

There is not even a greeting. Jesus does not introduce himself!

How rude. Is Jesus being impolite?

We can safely presume that Jesus is never impolite.

He is surprising and does not abide by ordinary protocol,

but he is never impolite.

Jesus knows his interlocutor, the person to whom he speaks.

When the person and “go there” with him,

Jesus goes directly to what he wishes to reveal.

And because Jesus is in fact always being loving,

what would occur and be communicated in the regular formalities

of polite interaction is included.

With Nicodemus we see how Jesus nails it, how Jesus goes for the gusto,

and articulates what is essential.

Jesus speaks with authority: “Amen, Amen” sets the stage

—an expression that none of the prophets used.

What Jesus says is a lot for Nicodemus, who is part of an inherited tradition.

Jesus knows to say it because Nicodemus is seeking truth.

Truth-seekers are open, are open minded.

Jesus says to Nicodemus that he must be born from above,  
and thus born again.

And so Jesus tells him that tradition is not enough.

The kingdom of God, that is, the life of God, God reigning,  
is not inherited, but received.

God shares his life, and in this gift, in this sharing, we are reborn.

It might appear that Jesus embarrasses Nicodemus.

One could expect Nicodemus to know these things.

He is a doctor of the law.

Jesus is not embarrassing Nicodemus, however,

but expressing his trust in Nicodemus and inviting deep conversion.

Before the complete conversion however, Nicodemus wrestles with Jesus.

***Verse 4* “Nicodemus said to him ‘How can a person, once grown old, be born again? Surely he cannot reenter his mother’s womb and be born again, can he?’”**

Nicodemus underscores the human illogicality of what Jesus says.

How does Jesus respond?

He reiterates what he said – in a sense, more specifically,

and then proceeds to articulate why Nicodemus does not understand.

***Verse 5 and 6* “Jesus answered ‘Amen, Amen, I say to you no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh, what is born of spirit is spirit.’”**

Nicodemus thinks according to human logic.

Nicodemus, however, like all of us, must be born again.

that is, must receive the life of God, which has its own logic,  
beyond human logic.

***Verse 7 and 8* “Do not be amazed that I told you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it wills and you can hear the sound it makes but you do not know whither it comes, or whence it goes: so it is with everyone who is born of the spirit.”**

Being born again entails going beyond all human references.

As wonderful as human life is, divine life is *more* wonderful.

Hence, the image of the wind used by Jesus whose origin we know not.

When it comes to

- being born again
- the divine life

we can no longer say “I know where I come from”.

This, of course, implies letting go...

Nicodemus must let go.

Such is the only way to receive what Jesus gives,

and, in receiving what Jesus gives, be born again.

Jesus will then proceed to reveal to Nicodemus who He is,

how he will introduce humanity into the divine life,

and, all the more, how surrender is key.

Jesus is the light of the world, Who will be lifted, drawing all to Himself.