

Sunday 14 March 2021

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Fourth Sunday of Lent:

Readings: [John 3:14-21](#)

What's the work of a Christian? What is it that you and I as Christian believers are called to do? In our Lent sermon series, 'Words to live by' we have been considering all kinds of aspects of Christian life and living: from how to live faithfully in times of difficulty and challenge, the arid wilderness times of life; or thinking about how to remind ourselves of God's presence when all we can feel is absence and abandonment, the times when we feel far from God; to thinking about how God sustains our growth in faith and how we might be able to measure that growth. This week I'd like to reflect with you on the work of a Christian.

Remember those career counselling sessions, where the counsellor asked you what you think your next stage on the journey on, or into, employment might look like and then tells you that you might consider working in a hospital setting? Well, at least that's what I was told when I went through that exercise at age 16. The counsellor who told me to look at hospital work wasn't entirely wrong. They successfully identified that I had a passion for pastoral work and the work of healing. My first paid work during my school holidays, though, was perhaps not the best introduction. I did work at a hospital, that's true. But I was filing and archiving patient records; not giving folks pastoral support. It'd take another decade or so before I entered a hospital as a chaplain, and began making fuller use of my gifts. Only now, twenty years or so after ordination, have I come to realise that at its best really the entire church is a kind of field hospital: a place where wounded people come, or are brought in by others, to be given access to the means of healing. The healing that was won by the work of Christ on the cross and which has become the work of every Christian.

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Today's gospel reading takes us to a night-time conversation between Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel and member of the highest religious court of the land in which Jesus lived, the Sanhedrin, and Jesus. The two are talking about what it means to belong to God; what it means to be born again. When Jesus speaks of re-birth, he speaks of a spiritual reorientation to God, Nicodemus soon established, and not about a physical re-birth. At the heart of their discussion stands a reflection on the purpose of Jesus' coming into the world. 'God so loved the world', Jesus told Nicodemus, 'that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life' (John 3:16).

Nicodemus already believed that Jesus was sent by God. That's why he has sought him out. At the outside of their conversation, he tells Jesus that the works that Jesus does, reveal that he has been sent by God: 'No one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him' (John 3:2). The works of Jesus show that he is doing God's work, the teacher of Israel affirms. Doing God's work is what reveals God's kingdom in the world, shows forth God's presence among us. 'Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may clearly be seen that our deeds have been done in God', Jesus tells Nicodemus at the end of their conversation (John 3:20).

The work of God is highly visible and fully transparent, Jesus tells. It shines like a bright light. And just as shining a light into a dark place expels the darkness, so the work of God can be divisive—separating light from darkness, love from hatred, Jesus tells. For those who seek darkness rather than light, hatred rather than love, the work of God will be confrontational, will be a kind of judgement. ‘This is the judgment’, Jesus told Nicodemus, ‘that the light has come into the darkness and people loved darkness rather than light’ (John 3:19). Jesus here speaks of himself as the light, we know with the hindsight of having read the entire story. We know that when Jesus speaks of the coming into the world of the Light of the World, or the Son of God, he refers to himself. God’s judgement therefore is to be separated from Jesus. And in that separation lies the condemnation of those far away from God.

The purpose of the work of God is for all people to be offered salvation, find healing and experience God’s love. ‘God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world’, Jesus tells Nicodemus, ‘but so that the world might be saved through him’ (John 3:16). The world finds its salvation in coming to recognise what we, the readers of the gospel, are privileged to know from the beginning: that Jesus is God’s only Son, sent to redeem the world. That he invites women and men to accept him as the light of their lives. That he calls people to show forth that light through what they do, sharing with him in the work of saving and healing. Nicodemus is right: Jesus cannot do the works he does apart from God. He has come from God and is God. Indeed, Jesus will tell the people later in the story that the works that Father has given Jesus to do testify that the Father has sent him (John 5:36). And that the work that has been given to Jesus is entirely the result of God’s love.

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Jesus’ work of salvation, of healing, is both the consequence of his Father’s love, and reveals his Father’s love. It expresses the Father’s love for the entire cosmos, and shows it forth to the world. A few verses after our gospel reading concludes Jesus will explain: ‘The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands’ (John 3:35). Just as the Father loves the Son, so the Son loves the Father. Because the Son gives his life for the salvation of the world, granting the world new, eternal life. Later in the gospel, Jesus will explain: ‘For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again’ (John 10:17). God’s work is shown forth in the mutual love of the Father and the Son on a cosmic scale so that ‘everyone who believes may have eternal life’ (John 3:16).

And just as the Father loves the Son and the Son the Father, so Jesus loves his own disciples. Jesus’ work of calling, saving and healing people is undertaken so that no-one may be lost. ‘I guarded them, and protected them in your name, Father’, Jesus will pray just before his Passion, ‘so that not one of them will be lost’ (John 17:12). ‘All mine are yours, and yours are mine’ (John 17:10). And just as Jesus loves his own and works for their salvation, so his own need to love one another and share his work. Work so that all may know that we are Jesus’ followers because we are participants in his work of salvation. It is in our love for one another and for Jesus, that the work of God is made known and shown forth. ‘As you, Father are in me in I in you, may they also be in us’, Jesus later prays to the Father, ‘so that the world may know that you have sent me, and have loved them, even as you have loved me’ (John 17:23).

It is by our love for God and God's people that we who believe show that we belong to God. It is by our love for others that the work of God is revealed in our world. That work will attract opposition, Jesus warns. It will take all of our gifts, cost all that we are and have, and will last for a lifetime. 'Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it might clearly be seen that their deeds have been done in God', Jesus concludes his night-time conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:21). And that might have been the end of the story, with Nicodemus turning away from the light and departing into the night.

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But that is not how the story ended for Nicodemus, and it should not be how the story ends for us, either. At the foot of the cross, Nicodemus was finally able to make sense of Jesus' words. He sees the darkness engulf the Light of the World, sees the Son give his life in obedience to the Father's command, and so complete the work of salvation. He sees Jesus give up his spirit, and so commence the work of rebirth. He sees the blood and the water flowing from Jesus' side, and suddenly understands how people may be reborn by water and the spirit—be washed from sin and all that holds us back from God in the blood of the crucified. When the sky went black that first Good Friday, Nicodemus witnessed all these events. More importantly, he knew that the dark was not for him, and resolved to choose for himself that from now on his 'deeds would be clearly seen in God' (John 3:21). Once Jesus has been taken from the cross, Nicodemus went to Pilate to ask for the release of Jesus' body for burial.

For Nicodemus this meant stepping into the light, leaving behind his secret devotion of Jesus. By entering the Roman governor's residence to ask for the body of his dead friend, Nicodemus literally excommunicated himself. He lost his privileged place on the Council and became someone who, by touching a dead body on the eve of the Passover, would be forbidden to worship with his former community. At the foot of the cross, Nicodemus decided that he would no longer hide his faith, but openly confess his loyalty to Jesus. That he would face exclusion from his former faith community in order to enter into the work of Christ.

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There may be folks among us today, who have yet to make the decision that Nicodemus made at the foot of the cross: the decision to accept for themselves that Jesus is the Son of God who showed forth God's abundant love for the world by offering salvation and healing for all. If you are yet to make the decision to enter into discipleship, please know that this Cathedral is a safe place to take such a decision; that we will support you in your faith journey, even if your home community of faith can or will not do so. We know that folks still risk alienation because of their love for, and loyalty to, Jesus. We know that the price some new Christians pay for their loyalty to Jesus may be just as costly as that paid by the 'secret' disciple Nicodemus. But we have a good track record in supporting new Christians who have taken that costly decision here, and have enabled them to step into the work of leadership. If this is you: we'll do the same again for you.

I suspect, though, that a larger group of us are here because we have come to believe the truth that Jesus is God's Son sent to save and heal our world some time ago. If that is you, then I encourage you to think about what the work that Christ calls you to undertake does

look like for you today. I said at the beginning that I have come to discover that the words of the career counsellor that I might be best suited to work in a hospital have, in a way, come true for me. That I think that at its best our Cathedral is really a bit like a field hospital. A safe place where people can come: wounded and tired, shell shocked and weary. A place where it is safe to ask the questions about healing. A place where it is safe to begin the journey to wholeness. A place where folks both can receive swift interventions for life-threatening wounds, and be given opportunities to begin training to bring in and help heal others themselves.

A hospital can only work effectually when many people contribute their gifts to the overall work of healing. That can include sixteen-year-old patient record assistants like my younger self who eventually might enter into a position of leadership. Each one of us have a part to play in the work of Christ. Nicodemus entered the work of Christ in an instant of conversion at the foot of the cross. I learnt about the work of Christ through a life-time's gradual revelation, with a few moments of radical re-orientation thrown into the mix; a process that is still unfolding. Your own way of entering into Christ's work has to be fully your own. It may be a bit of Nicodemus' sudden conversion, or a life-time's nurture, re-orientation and discernment, or a bit of both.

Regardless of how you enter Christ's work of showing forth God's abundant love to a hurting world, I ask that you join me in praying that you and I may be people who willingly enter that work. People who step up to open the doors of the field hospital; who welcome others in; who drive the ambulances; who share in diagnosis; who help tend the wounds; who contribute to paying the bills so that all may access healing free of charge; people who provide the food or clean up; who talk with staff and patients; people who teach and train; who administer, who keep the records or who make sure we're fully compliant. I ask you to pray with me that we may become people who together share in this place in the work of healing that is Christ's and ours.

This Lent, pray with me that we may become people who know in our own lives, and live out in our work here at the heart of this city and diocese, the good news that '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' (John 3:16).