

Homily for 4th Sunday of Lent 2021.



In the days when you could nip down to London for a quick visit, I always tried to get to the British Museum. I would make one of my stops the Ancient Middle Eastern section. There you will find in a case of its own one of the seals that Cyrus sent out to all the parts of his Empire telling them that as a new king he was offering them an amount of autonomy. This is what the first reading ends with. The is small, about a foot and a bit across. Covered in the message in cuneiform (wedge style writing) and a bit cracked as well. Part of this new freedom for all the people was allowing one small people, pretty insignificant in the Empire's make-up, to return to their homeland and rebuild their place of worship. And so the Israelites set off once more, back across the desert and via the usual trade routes to Jerusalem.

For Cyrus this trek of a small people was probably not of any great account. But through the history of the Israelites/Jews in the most read book in the world, their scriptures, The Bible, Cyrus' became famous throughout history.

It is pretty much the same with the gospel today. Jesus is talking to Nicodemus in a poor, little house, in the dark of night, in one of the most insignificant parts of the Roman Empire. Why should history ever hear of this again? And yet through the Bible it has become one of the most famous discussions of all time. If you were to ask any Christian who knew their Bible, "What is the most important phrase in it", the line they chose might be this line: 'Yes, God loved the world do much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life.' This is John's definition of what Jesus is about and in one short sentence encapsulates his whole mission. At the core is God's love for his Son and God's love for us.

In both these readings the people of God have yet again to make a journey. In the first reading it is to set off to Jerusalem, not knowing what they will find. In the gospel it is the journey that Nicodemus is making in tentative stages. From the darkness into the light. And it is not an easy journey.

Jesus is the truth. The key to moving from the shade to coming out into the light is about choosing the truth.

Truth is not relative. Truth is anchored in Jesus and his act of salvation for us.

To believe in him is to live as best we can a life of truth. When we prefer to hide our lives in the darkness, then we do so out of fear that actions we most dislike in ourselves will be exposed.

Truth brings a life of integrity, but it can be painful.

What both the two readings show is that the way to this life of truth can come from highly unexpected and even unintended places. Cyrus did not intend to open the world to this newly established people of God and continue our salvation history. Nicodemus did not realise the full significance of who he was speaking to and the effect it would have on his life.

The Church is often asking us to look at ‘the signs of the times.’ To seek the light even when our world seems full of darkness.

In his new book, *Let us Dream*, that I have mentioned before the Pope speaks about this ‘coronavirus time’ as dreadful, and yet one where we have to seek out the good that lies within it, even when we are struggling, because it is there that we will find God at work, especially in what seem to be the darkest places. What this requires is belief, and a readiness to accept that God can choose the most unlikely actors to reveal his plan to us, just as a foreign Gentile king was the last person that the Chosen people would expect God to act through. Just as the wealthy Nicodemus could never have thought that it would be in some back street little room he would encounter the person who would change his life forever.

God doesn’t rush us into these encounters, we cannot force them. But Lent is a time for being massively open to giving God the opportunity.

A time for looking beyond people’s exteriors to within, both friends and strangers, of seeing that what might seem a disaster may turn our lives in a new positive direction, of renewing relationships by looking again at the people we know and not taking them for granted but appreciating them.

We never know where Jesus will ask us to go to meet him. I went to a film ‘Jesus of Montreal’ with a friend in London once, we were just looking for something to do, never expecting anything, and it became part of my call to the priesthood. However obscure and odd the invitation may seem, we have to be open and ready to accept it. That is the excitement of an encounter with God.