

This 4th Sunday in Lent we reflect on Nicodemus being moved to visit Jesus in the night. (Jn3:14-21).

Reflecting on today's Gospel passage we will agree that it fits very well into this season of Lent, as we look into ourselves and hope for Repentance, Reconciliation and Conversion. It also fits in very aptly with the parts of Fr. Selvam's talks in which he is inviting us to look at a more contemplative way of praying and living especially as we prepare for the General Chapter.

Nicodemus, a man of Religious outstanding and prayer, was drawn to look for a deeper meaning to his life and so was drawn into the presence of Jesus. He went in the dark of night because he was afraid of being seen by the Pharisees, afraid of being judged and rejected by them and by others who may recognise him.

He is in the dark symbolically too, not fully understanding the teachings and person of Jesus. He realises that he is living in darkness and ignorance which is why he was drawn to risk visiting Jesus. He was drawn, as we are, as many are in different ways, to be in the presence of Jesus. Nicodemus was aware of being in darkness and was searching for the Light and the Truth of who he really was because he saw that Light and Truth in Jesus.

What then, has Nicodemus to do with contemplation? As we reflect on our lives during Lent supported by the many books, reflections and homilies on the subject, we find that Lent can challenge us in ways that highlight the 'dark' side of our way of being too. Like Nicodemus, when we take the risk to be in the presence of Jesus, we go with the whole of ourselves which includes those dark aspects of ourselves that we can't always see. Those areas within ourselves that we have buried so deep within us that we are no longer aware that they are there but in some cases are there festering, a bit like an untreated wound. Jesus draws us into a 'Way' of contemplation to bring those wounds and areas of ourselves that are hidden in the dark, into the light, to heal and redeem them.

Unlike Nicodemus, we needn't be afraid of being judged or rejected because Jesus only wants us to be aware of being in His presence where he can look on us with love. And so we can accept the invitation to sit in the awareness of our presence in His presence, in trust. There, we empty our minds of all distractions, thoughts and words so as to listen, to listen with our inner ears, to the voice of God in the depths of our being. There, He draws from the depths of our being, all that we are, into the Light, especially those areas and feelings that need to be healed, redeemed and transformed.

When praying in a particular contemplative 'Way', by surrendering ourselves in God's presence, in emptying our minds and by taking the risk to be vulnerable, we don't need to ask God for anything, not for favours, not to be redeemed, nor for His gifts. He knows what our needs are and what lies within us. He knows what separates us from ourselves and from Him. Jesus is the only Gift we need. He will never abandon us. He is always holding us with His redeeming love and Grace. In our surrendering to Him, open to receive His Grace, transformation will take place, as happened with Nicodemus.

One of my first experiences in my early days as an infant teacher reminds me of such redeeming love. A mother left her child in the classroom for her first day at school. The little girl didn't understand why her mother wasn't staying with her. The separation made her very vulnerable, afraid and insecure. No amount of cajoling or tender loving care shown her would encourage her to settle and participate in any activity. When home time arrived and her mother appeared in the classroom, the little girl immediately ran to her mother and burst into uncontrollable sobbing. The combination of all those pent up feelings of anxiety, fear, rejection, and separation that she was unable to express during the day, that she had harboured internally and unable to solve, caused her to break out in uncontrollable crying.

Why was this so? When the child's mother arrived all the child's feelings came to the surface in her mother's loving embrace. All those feelings were healed and redeemed. Her security was restored.

(Continued on page 2)

It is the same for us when in a particular 'Way' of contemplation. When we acknowledge and allow our painful feelings, our buried wounds, to arise and we accept them, they are welcomed and lovingly received and embraced by the trusting and comforting presence of our loved One, God our Father. His Grace will heal, transform and redeem our painful experiences and feelings because we have allowed ourselves to surrender, to be empty and vulnerable, trusting in God's presence by simply being faithfully aware and attentive to being present in God's presence.

As you will be aware there are many forms of contemplative prayer. The very small example of the particular 'Way' of contemplative prayer, that I share with you here, and I stress it is only a small taste, is attributed to the 'Contemplative Way of Praying and Living in the Way of Franz Jalics SJ', who only died in February at the age of 93 years and has left a wonderful gift in the 'Contemplative Way' he developed .

This 'Way' or 'Path' is Ignatian and is a continuation of the latter part of the 4th Week of the Spiritual Exercises that Ignatius was unable to complete. Franz Jalics SJ has developed a continuation of that last part called 'Contemplation to Attain Love'. This doesn't involve understanding, memory or will (*you may be familiar with that wonderful hymn, 'Take, Lord, Receive'*). This 'Contemplation to Attain Love' is the purest form of contemplation because we are simply and lovingly directed to nothing but the Divine Person which is the goal of the Spiritual Exercises. It is anyone's goal, whether familiar with the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius or not. It is for anyone who is seeking to pray and live more contemplatively.

Franz Jalics SJ developed this particular 'Way' from his personal life experiences some of which were very harsh, when he had to cope with physical, mental and spiritual suffering through war and through being abducted, chained, blindfolded for many months whilst living with the poor in Argentina. He also studied and experienced different forms of contemplation, Zen and Centering Prayer etc. His 'Way' is none of these nor is it Mindfulness. His aim was always to bring people closer to Jesus Christ and he knew from his own experiences the importance of orientating one's self constantly on Jesus.

This 'Way' is simply another way that many are drawn to and practice, a 'Way' and a process that leads us into the awareness of being in God's presence in the present moment where God can work within us.

We know God is always present but we aren't always aware. Therefore, the first part of this particular process, the first step on this 'Way' of contemplation, is to start by going out into nature. As Franz Jalics says, 'Nature is the best teacher of contemplation'.

If you are drawn to try this particular 'Way', go out into nature, or simply look out on to the garden or at a plant in your room and use all your senses to notice what you notice. Similarly, take your daily activities slowly, use your senses to notice what you notice when doing them. Don't think about what you are looking at or what you can hear, taste, touch or smell. Don't make a judgement about what you have noticed. Simply use your senses to notice without analysing what you notice. Don't think, don't use words, simply become aware of your presence in God's presence in the present moment. Feelings may arise, allow them to be there and address them later as God may be speaking to you through them. Before you go out into nature, or take time to notice what you are looking at etc., offer that time as your gift to God in surrender, service and praise. Should you be fending off thoughts and distractions during that time it will not have been wasted – you gave the time as your gift to God.

To draw this to a close: Recall how Nicodemus was drawn into the presence of Jesus in darkness, physically and symbolically, with an open heart and mind ready to listen in the awareness of being in His presence and so was transformed by such an encounter – we can be too.

Sr. Mary Dargie