

Langley Mennonite Fellowship, May 30, 2021 John 3:1 – 21: *The Quest of a Lifetime*

Introduction

When Ian invited this reflection on John 3, he indicated it was one of his favourite passages. I can echo that! And it contains *the most famous verse of all*: **John 3:16**. We kids growing up in a conservative Christian household could readily rote rattle off that verse in the King James Version—even if we never stopped to think of what it meant. I’ll stop though and reflect a bit today.

I’ve decided to call the talk “*The Quest of a Lifetime*.” In one way or another, a life *quest* is:

- what we all are on;
- what Nicodemus clearly illustrates;
- what every reader of John’s Gospel encounters in various ways;
- what gives me license to wander sometimes from today’s text in *quest* of related material 😊.

As most know, *John’s Gospel* has a unique place in the New Testament. It stands out as one of significantly different community origin from the other three (so-called Synoptic) Gospels. It recounts many stories not found in the others; waxes *theological* far more; and was put to writing much later—at the end of the first century.

There are many historical-critical questions that need not concern a Sunday reflection! So I’ll ignore and move on.

The Gospel Bookends

Nothing in the first three Gospels compares with *two key phrases* serving as *bookends* at the beginning and end of the Gospel of John:

- “The Word was God”—chapter one, verse one;
- “My Lord and my God”—chapter twenty, verse twenty-eight—Thomas’ confession of faith after the Resurrection. It is precisely to that very climactic affirmation that the Gospel of John points the reader: “*so that you, too might believe*,” says the text; *so that we might embrace Jesus in similar gesture*. This “belief” motif is reprised numerous times in today’s text.

Textual Grand Conversations

There are many grand conversations in this Gospel about:

- God,
- humanity,
- the world,
- the relationship between flesh and spirit/Wisdom,
- and the life found in Jesus—

all designed to lead us Questers to ultimately confess with Thomas: “*My Lord and my God*.” Such acknowledgement is invitation and gateway in fact to the “*abundant life*” Jesus promises in

chapter 10. And the *ethical agenda* of this abundant-life “confession/belief” is, simply put, “love.”

Nicodemus

The first part of the text read today (verses 1—12) is the story of one such *grand* conversation. There is a second part (verses 13—15) consisting of a brief clarification by Jesus—with or without Nicodemus still present. (The text does not indicate.) The concluding part (verses 16—21) is further explanation, this time by the narrator. And “*belief*” arises repeatedly in the second and third sections, with John 3:16 a kind of crescendo.

Nicodemus is introduced to us here for the first time in John. Both he and the reader are intrigued by this highly unusual itinerant preacher whom the former addresses respectfully as “Rabbi.” By this time, the reader knows already more than Nicodemus, for John One in the first eighteen verses is theologically loaded with elevated claims about Jesus—that questing Nicodemus is not privy to.

Kitchener Story

Esther and I began our marriage in 1977 by putting down roots for two years in Kitchener Ontario. I was on a two-year term there as a Volunteer Service worker (VSer back then) with Mennonite Central Committee. Esther found work as nurse therapist on a Child Abuse Team with The Children’s Aid Society. Our eldest son was born there.

I was on a personal quest of learning how to apply love of neighbour and enemies. MCC proved to be excellent inspiration, model and teacher. Still is!

We joined a Mennonite House Church and became part of a study group. A series of articles about Jesus had just been published by the *Mennonite Reporter*, precursor to *Canadian Mennonite*. I knew the Editor. We also knew the author of the articles: one of the House Church leaders, who taught at (Mennonite) Conrad Grebel College, part of the University of Waterloo. Among other points, the articles disputed the divinity of Christ and the Trinity, explaining that some early Anabaptists embraced 16th-century *Socinianism* (you can look that up!) with a similar understanding about Jesus.

Esther and I, recent graduates of Regent College, an evangelical seminary and part of UBC, discovered that most in our study group did not like the exalted language about Jesus. The Editor agreed with the prof.

I, *puzzled*, had a separate long face-to-face discussion with each.

First segue: This was how Nicodemus in his quest felt approaching Jesus: *puzzled*—and needed the cover of darkness to avoid detection, given his position as a leader of the Pharisees; and Jesus’ critique of same. (I’ll complete our Kitchener story later, including a *second segue*.)

Kingdom of God Theme

Several themes from the chapter One Prologue are furthered and clarified in the exchange with Nicodemus:

- Spiritual birth;

- Life;
- The world;
- Belief;
- Light.

One further *mention*, raised many times more often in the other Gospels, is: *The Kingdom of God*. But the term is only found here in chapter 3. Yet Jesus as one’s *personal* “King” is affirmed far more frequently throughout John than in the other Gospels. This seems in keeping with the *directly personal tone* of John’s Gospel: we are invited to make Jesus *our King* and *our Lord*—not unlike elsewhere seeing God’s *Kingdom Come* working as leaven giving rise to a loaf; looking like lost sheep that are found; or a vineyard handed to others when the first stewards initially rejected the Owner’s Son. Jesus in John, in counterpoint to the other Gospels is *that Bread; our Shepherd; the True Vine*.

While *King/Lord* and *Kingdom* are strange terms to us, there are no easy one-word alternative translations. They point to: *deliberate invitation to Jesus to exercise power over our lives*.

But when in the Gospel of John these terms are fed through the Supreme Filter of *Love*—local *singer/songwriter/spiritual director Cathy Hardy’s favourite word for God*—Jesus offers nonetheless a uniquely—*heavenly* as it were—“power over” relationship option that runs contrary to all other harmful cultural norms, as addressed for instance in MCC’s End Abuse Program that Esther and I are happily part of. Jesus in fact models this radically inverted “*power over*” dynamic by picking up basin and towel and washing his disciples’ feet, saying in chapter 13:

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” . . . **13**“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. **14**Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. **15**I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

This kind of *alternative Kingdom living* becomes even more explicit in chapter 17, with Jesus saying what his command is:

9“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. **10**If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love.

...

15I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

...

17This is my command: Love each other.

So when in John's Prologue we read that the *Word was God*, and at the end we encounter Thomas' exclamation to Jesus, *My Lord and my God*, we come to understand unmistakably the evangelist's aim in writing the Gospel, in his words:

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (20:29).

And the ethical dimension of "believing" throughout John's Gospel is *love*.

This then is the high point of Nicodemus', of the reader's, of our quest.

Kitchener Story Continued

When way back in 1977 I asked my two discussion partners about the above-said structure of John's Gospel, with the two bookends framing the narrative, they gave me in response a new religious term: *appropriate*. They indicated:

Just as no one fully *appropriates* Scripture, so we choose not to *appropriate* that message in John's Gospel.

Fair enough. We also made consequently a choice: to leave the House Church—but remain friends. *We simply sought something more satisfying from the Great Tradition than post-Enlightenment scepticism*. We continued our quest, as our friends continued theirs.

Trinity



Second segue: To be sure though, there is no full articulation of the Trinity in the Christian Scriptures. That took centuries to hammer out, and the story sadly was not always one of loving enlightened good-will. But when the great iconographer **Andrei Rublev** in the 15th century was commissioned to paint an icon of the Trinity, he created the greatest masterpiece ever of Russian iconography, dubbed simply: *The Trinity*.

The Trinity depicts the three angels who visited Abraham at the Oak of Mamre (Genesis 18), and the painting is full of symbolism. At the time of Rublev, *the Holy Trinity was seen to be the very essence of spiritual unity, peace, harmony, mutual love and humility*.

It is the story of Abraham on his faith quest of the Promised Land, who in a fully vulnerable gesture of hospitality welcomes three mysterious Strangers—a trinity of "angels unawares" so dubbed in the *Book of Hebrews*

(13:2)—striding across the desert. But they could just as well have been enemies out to plunder, rape and murder.

Abraham's fateful—*faith-full*—choice to offer hospitality, however, became *the widely recognized founding moment of the three Great Abrahamic Faiths: Judaism; Christianity; and Islam*. It was all-together an intuitive act of risky faith.

Now, if *mutual loving hospitality* according to Rublev is the very essence of the Trinity, supremely to be imitated by us, *then I'm all in!*

Or if in our humanly *bearing God's image* we are urged to *love neighbour and enemies as being our very selves* (“*Love your neighbour as [being] yourselves,*” right?—the Hebrew original meaning in Leviticus 19:18), why then we discover, joyously, that we are invited as it were to join in the never-ending Love-Dance of the Trinity. This links in turn all who accept the summons to the *grandest Communal Line Dance in history*, stretching back through the mists of time all the way to Abraham and his monumental original act of chancy hospitality faith. In joining that “*great cloud of witnesses,*” *we ideally become collectively in effect the fourth dancing “partner” of the Trinity*—with due apologies to mathematicians—but as indeed some theologians imaginatively suggest!

So whatever Nicodemus was about in his late-night quest, we the readers reflecting on it are richly rewarded for that encounter's inclusion in this Gospel. *We* for sure get more than *he* bargained for! Then again, as in all encounters with *God in Christ*—John's and Thomas' *Word become flesh*—we invariably too may get more than counted on as we continue on our own questing-faith journey . . .

Or did you anticipate a reflection on the Trinity from today's lectionary reading? . . . Neither did I . . . *Interestingly, in the Western Church calendar, today is in fact Trinity Sunday—first Sunday after Pentecost.*

And we wonder, as Jesus intimates, if Nicodemus understood *anything Trinitarian* or otherwise spiritual of the great Abrahamic hospitality-to-neighbours-strangers-and-enemies faith story that began at the Oak of Mamre? It seems he came—and left—puzzled and confused . . .

It was later however by his intervention together with Joseph of Arimethea's tomb that the crucified body of Jesus was received and laid to rest with enormously costly seventy-five pounds of burial spices and ointments—at Nicodemus' expense. And with that, one surmises that he too puzzled his personal quest through to eventual reception of Jesus as Lord and King . . . And with that committal to acts of love in imitation—even showing *post mortem* hospitality to Jesus—executed as an enemy of the Sanhedrin to which Nicodemus belonged, and of Rome—a highly risky faith action.

Conclusion: John 3:16

In conclusion, honourable mention is due of that most famous biblical verse, John 3:16—one I at least no longer rattle off unthinkingly. It compresses in a nutshell what *Ultimate Love does* and

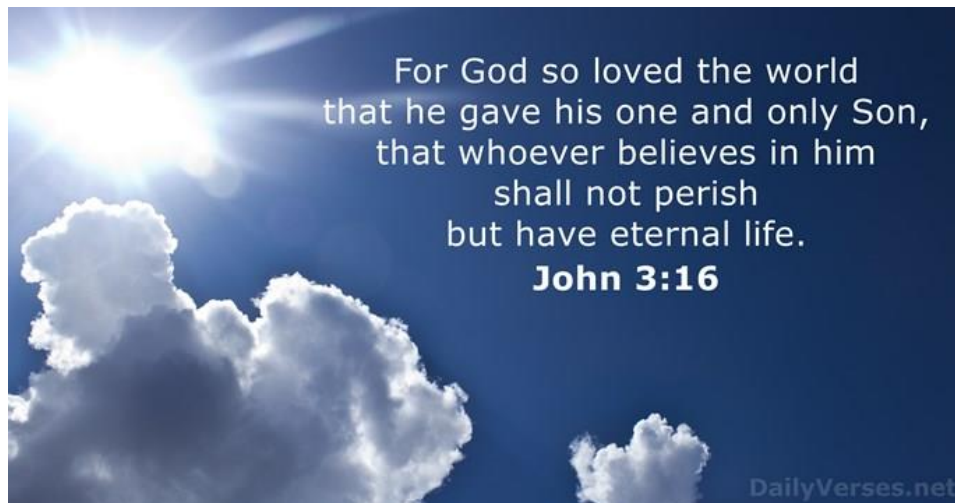
did in Jesus—the all-time greatest Cosmic freewill donation known to humanity; awareness of which gratefully is elucidated by Nicodemus’ late-night quest. Theologian **Paul Minear** puts it thus in his reflection on this verse:

God offers life to his *enemies*. This is the “ultimate insanity” of the revelation that the narrator is trying to convey to his readers. To believe in that insanity [Jesus instructs] is what requires a rebirth through the Spirit ([*John: The Martyr’s Gospel*](#), New York: Pilgrim.)

Philosophers **Hannah Arendt** and **Ivan Illich** separately declare the **Parable of the Good Samaritan** in Luke’s Gospel to be similarly the most singular *novel ethical manoeuver* in human history, namely: Jesus’ call to actually *Love your enemies!* . . .

But to make a point I shall cite John 3:16, simultaneously placing the actual verse on the screen. It will be a curious inversion of its message. It is an *exception clause* rendition. It has been far too widespread and evil—*ubiquitous* and *iniquitous!*—in Church history. You’ll right away get the idea. Here goes, together with the screen juxtaposition:

For God so loved the world [except our enemies] that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever [except our enemies] believes in him shall not perish [except our enemies who rightfully are slaughtered] but have eternal life [except our enemies who can go to hell!].



How do we fare/have we fared *on the contrary* in imitation of Christ, of the Trinity, of the unfootnoted message of this verse about humanity at enmity with God, and God’s loving, risky hospitality offered us?

And that quest-ion hopefully will take us the remainder of a lifetime on some kind of stumbling-heavenwards quest for an answer.

*Indeed: **The Quest of a Lifetime!***