

It's a pity our Gospel today doesn't start by saying a little bit about Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to Jesus at night to learn from him what he was about, for that has much to say about the rest of this Gospel passage.

Right at the beginning of this passage Jesus reminds Nicodemus of an occurrence that took place while the Jews were still making their way through the desert after their escape from Egypt. Dissatisfied with their progress and the limited variety of food available to them, they once more complained against Moses in a way that was getting ugly. It so happened that they were travelling through an area invested with vipers, and the next thing they knew was that many of them were bitten, and died. Somehow, they saw this as a punishment from God for their rebellion, and appealed to Moses to pray for them for relief and healing. Moses was instructed to sculpt the image of a snake in bronze and hang it on a pole, - with the message that anyone who was bitten should look at it and be healed, - that is to say: that in looking at the snake they would recognise their own ugliness, and in turning away, return to serving God as they were called to.

Jesus related that occurrence to his own crucifixion-to-come, - to a form of execution that reveals all the ugliness of what human beings will do to other human beings, and pleading with us to turn away from that ugliness to the life that only God can give.

What follows is the most profound assurance of the love God has for us that words can express: "Yes, God loved the world so much that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost, but may have eternal life."

"For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved. No one who believes in him will be condemned; but whoever refuses to believe is condemned already, because he has refused to believe in the name of God's only Son."

Jesus then goes on: "On these grounds is sentence pronounced: that though the light has come into the world men have shown they prefer darkness to the light because their deeds were evil.

And indeed, everyone who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, for fear his actions should be exposed; but the man who lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be plainly seen that what he does is done in God."

I suppose I could leave the homily there, and leave you to your own reflections, but that would be a cop-out, for there are further lessons to be learnt.

Nicodemus appears twice more in the Gospel of St. John; - the second time is a few weeks before Jesus is crucified, when the Jewish Sanhedrin came together and decided that Jesus had to be done away with. Nicodemus had the courage to stand up and protest that it was against the Law to condemn a person without a fair trial, but he was shouted down with the accusation that he must be a disciple of Jesus as well, - so Nicodemus crawled back into his more comfortable darkness.

The third time came after the Crucifixion when Joseph of Arimathea had asked Pilate for permission to take the body of Jesus down from the Cross. Nicodemus came along to assist with that task, and brought with him about a 100 pounds of spices, myrrh and aloes, to wrap around the body to hold back the decay. It was an action that immortalised him in the Gospel, but after this we hear no more of him. Did he go on to take a role in the growth of the first Christian community in Jerusalem, or did he slip back into obscurity, into darkness again? We don't know, but his action also puts us in question.

There are so many things in our world today that call for change, - that call for stepping out of the darkness into the light, - that call us to face reality instead of the shadows, but somehow we equivocate.

We see it in the ugliness of confrontations caused by movements against poverty, abuse, racism, war, corruption in government, the banks, etc. There is talk and counter-talk, each side claiming the high ground but without facing the issue of how both can work together to bring about the change or the result that's needed.

How much more progress could we human beings make if people were able, in such instances to choose the light instead. How simple a problem

might become if an antagonist could say in the light: "That was really dumb of me, wasn't it? Few words are more courageous than those.

It isn't easy to choose "the light". It is often embarrassing. But it is always a maturing experience for the individual and a unifying experience for the community.