

You really don't want to, but sometimes you really should; we know that sometimes fears not faced can be better that way, the known can be worse than the unknown, there are times when the urge to keep your eyes firmly shut so you can't see can be overwhelming, but sometimes you have to face your nightmares and look in the shadows.

There are things there you'd rather not see, things lurking there nobody wants to see, unmentionables that generation after generation, time immemorial have put there, safely out of sight, out of mind; never quite erased but pushed to the extremity of our vision, where sight is dimmed and everything is comfortably blurred. No wonder we don't want to linger long gazing into the shadows, no wonder we quickly shift our eyes.

No wonder too, that though we fear the darkness, we want to be there. Because nobody wants to look into the shadows, there we will be unseen, hidden, unnoticed as we Gollum skulk in the slimy depths. Not much of a life, for sure, always scurrying for the shades, always shrinking into the covering shadows, forever flitting out of sight. Not much of a life, but life unnoticed is a life that is safe. Nobody hurts somebody they cannot see. Easier to stay hidden than to come out into the light.

When we first meet Nicodemus, he comes to see Jesus at night. He is an important man, he is a leader of the Jews. He has much to lose, so he comes secretly, nervously, unsure of what he will find and afraid that he will be seen. He comes groping and grasping. He comes with questions and arguments. And Jesus tells him that if he wishes to see the kingdom of God he must be born again. Looking for certainties, Nicodemus is greeted with what seems to be absurdities. Jesus tells him "All who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." Afraid of being seen, nervous of his position, this may not be quite what Nicodemus was hoping to hear. Scurrying back to safety he disappears back into the night.

Let's scroll forward. When Nicodemus next comes into camera shot to deliver a brief one-liner, it is becoming apparent that something from this first meeting has taken root. Something has changed. The Pharisees are, with the chief priests, plotting Jesus' downfall prompting Nicodemus to suggest that his fellows should listen to what Jesus has to say. He is quickly shouted down, he quickly goes quiet, but he has

spoken up. Slowly, tentatively, he is emerging from the dark. Nicodemus is coming out.

On Good Friday Nicodemus can no longer ask questions; the Jewish and Roman authorities believe that they have answered his sort of questions in the bluntest possible way. Nicodemus comes to bury Jesus; he comes with a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes to dress the corpse. At that very moment, the worst possible moment, when every instinct is demanding flight, Nicodemus comes out, he steps into the light.

This is not, immediately, evidently the glorious light of a new dawn. This is not the new light of Easter morning. This is the harsh glare of the spotlight. And as the corpse that Nicodemus is helping to bury attests, centre stage is always a dangerous place to be.

We cannot be sure why Nicodemus chose that moment of all moments to come out into the open, the gospels do not tell us. It certainly cannot be because of a belief in the future rewards of resurrection: you do not bury a body with an absurd amount of spices if you believe it is soon to be resurrected. Perhaps there was guilt there. Having failed to prevent the judicial murder of Jesus, perhaps Nicodemus was now overcompensating for his failure with his hundred pounds of aloes and myrrh. Perhaps he was moved by simple Jewish piety, perhaps, like the righteous Tobit, Nicodemus would not leave a Jewish corpse unburied. Or *perhaps* this is a classic example of what Christians would later call faith seeking understanding. Like many of the supporting actors in this drama, from Herod, the wise men and the shepherds to the disciples and the assorted collection of people Jesus meets, teaches, heals along the way Nicodemus is moved scarcely knowing what he is doing or why he is doing it. He is taking a step into the unknown, he is making the leap of faith, what his senses, what his intellect cannot understand, his soul can see.

Nicodemus's is a journey that all of us are still taking. It is the quintessential Christian journey, the journey from darkness to light.

It's not a journey we really want to take. This season of Lent is inviting us to look into the shadows; it is inviting us to see that the shadows don't end when we shift our gaze, because we are ourselves in the shadows; it is inviting us to notice that what is illuminating us is the light at the end of the tunnel, still far away.

We are invited out out the shadows, out into the light. Oh dear. We are called not from bad things to the good life; it will not be that suddenly we will always be smiling, suddenly everything will go our way, suddenly we will pass all our exams and always find a parking space. We're not going to start winning every time we go to the bingo or buy a raffle ticket or play the lottery, though of course, we will have secured for ourselves a far greater prize.

Like Nicodemus, we are called out into the harsh glare of the bright lights, to potential ridicule, loss of face, loss of status. To be a Christian is not to put our head over the parapet, it is to jump over it- wearing a very silly hat and no trousers. And there will be slings and arrows. This we already know. Remember, Jesus tells us, "if the world hates you,... it hated me first". We are to be buried with Christ, so that we are dead to all the world and all the world is dead to us.

But how easy it is to stay skulking in the shadows; how easy it is to run back to the safe, warm dark; how easy to cling to our position and our established status. How tempting to seek accommodation with the powers of this world, to make sure that we keep well within our comfort zone, to take anybody who starts to rock the boat... and nail them to a cross.

This is not the calling of the Christian, this is not the Christian faith. As Christians we are called to go into the uncomfortable, harsh, difficult places of the world; we are called to the brutal, the smelly, the foul and the filthy places, we are called into the pits of humanity, we are called to forget there ever was a comfort zone, we are called to leave Bethelhem and stagger to Calvary. This is why the oxymoronic absurdity of an armed forces chaplain can be. This is why the murderer condemned to be executed has a priest by his side. This is why Christians are to be found alongside the dregs of society. Our eyes have seen the glory and that glory is a condemned criminal dying on a cross.

This does not mean that the Christian journey is all going to be tears and pain and suffering and persecution. The Christian journey is one punctuated by moments of pungent beauty, of deep insights, of exquisite emotional release, moments, sometimes, of ecstatic joy. If we keep our eyes on the destination, we will scarcely notice that we are wading through the mud, we will not notice the pricking of the thorns, the hard knocks of the rocks in the road, the blisters on our feet.

But if following Christ means that nothing changes; if we love those who love us and greet only our brothers and sisters; if we see the condemned prisoner and bay for

his blood; if we see the dispossessed, the despised, the desperate and see only scroungers; if we are not up to our elbows in the grime of the world; if we are not grubbing in the gutters of humanity searching for the face of our Saviour; if there is no sacrifice in our faith; if we are Christians and the world does not hate us; if the world sees our faith and does not reach for the hammer and the nails; then we have learned nothing, we have moved from shadow to shadow, we are lost in shadowland.

We prepare in this Lent season to greet the glorious dawn of Easter morning, to rejoice in the brilliant rays of the Risen Son. Part of that preparation might be just a gentle but honest consideration of how we will look in the glare of that light.