

One of the reasons why our church buildings are more than just convenient shelters for a group of individuals to get together is the way their architecture supports our worship. This church, with what T.S. Eliot calls "Inexplicable Splendour of Ionian White and Gold" works on our senses, with the symmetry of Wren's design working to draw our eye forward. The lines carry us to the place where the Word is preached and the Sacrament celebrated.

We've just heard from St John's Gospel, and one of the striking things from St John's Gospel are the motifs that run through them, motifs that like the architecture we're surrounded by now give the gospel shape and structure and carry our eyes forward into a deeper understanding of the person and mission of Jesus Christ. One of those motifs running through the book of the unveiling of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ are meetings those people who are interested, intrigued by him, but who don't know quite how much that interest might mean. It's there at the start with the call of the disciples; it's there with the Samaritan woman and the well; it's there with some of the healing accounts; it's there in the passion narratives – encounters where Jesus is questioned and questions, and a bit more is revealed.

So we have before us the character of Nicodemus, evidently a seeker yet one who is nervous. We're told that he comes to Jesus by night – a hint not just at what time of day it is, but at another of those motifs that runs through John's Gospel of night and day/ darkness and light/ signifying doubt and faith. The poet Henry Vaughan says that Nicodemus *Did at midnight speak with the Sun!* For here's a meeting in the shadows in which something of the light comes through, a light which shines into the very purpose of our Festal gathering today in which we celebrate the vocation of this Society.

In the exchange of questions there's a conversation which takes place on two levels: Nicodemus initially on the plane of the material world, of physical reality: "how can someone be born again? How can these things be?" And Jesus lifting his vision from the temporal to the eternal, to the Kingdom of God, a world transfigured and made new that is before his eyes.

How is he to enter this Kingdom? Through a new kind of birth Jesus tells him, a birth that is of water and the Spirit. The language is symbolic: In the Bible water stands for this world, for it is from the waters of chaos that God forms his creation. It's the raw material for human nature. The Spirit, the animating breath of God inspires vitality, energy, and prophecy. It has the kind of power whereby even dry bones could be rekindled into life, the power of creative energy that renews the face of the earth. To be born of water and the Spirit is to offer the flesh that is ours to the transforming power of God.

Water and Spirit. We're pointed to the Spirit filled waters of baptismal rebirth, a new beginning as God forms a people for himself, sharing his glory. This is the rebirth that incorporates us into the life of the lifted-up Son of Man, born again into his new world, the world of the resurrection and life in the Spirit.

This is the life that Nicodemus himself stands on the cusp of. Truly the Spirit blows where it wills, but will he allow himself to be caught by its breath, to be knocked off his feet and into the way of life that is set before him?

We're left to speculate about his response, a speculation that increases later in the Gospel when we meet Nicodemus again at the burial of Jesus; but what we have so powerfully here, as in all those other meetings of the curious with the Lord that run through the pages of St John, is the patient presence of Jesus, suggesting, opening up, offering change and newness.

Do we see here something of the vocation of the Church, something of the vocation of those parishes this Society represents and strives to nurture? To be the patient Christ-like presence with the Nicodemus's of our own age, who, it seems in increasing number it seems, are curious, coming as it were under cover of night to find out if this is where life can be found.

Because something seems to be in the air, cautious, gentle, and fragile, yet unmistakable and hope-filled. The flat-lands of secularism are failing to answer the questions of a new generation; and neither are brands of religion that seem faddish or superficial.

Our parish churches offer the depth, the faithful commitment, the enduring witness in which it is possible for the questioning to be befriended, to see things afresh, to see themselves in a new way, to see God and his world with a deeper intensity – to say “things are different in this community because Jesus is around, I’m not sure what I’m getting into and it feels that I’m out of my depth but I want to stick with this and find out where it goes.” Nicodemus asks how one can be reborn. This is our question too: how can we help each other as we face transformation, so as to become apostles of life?

The truth that we must always keep alive in our local church communities is that we are outposts of the new creation, formed by water and the Spirit to be a place where encounter with Jesus can happen in the way it's meant to happen – and we find ourselves recalled to life with all whom the Lord draws to himself; places where the veil is lifted just a little so we catch the glimpse of the multitude St John the Divine describes in Revelation, and we join with them in wonder, love and praise.

The gift of this Society is to support that vision, not merely maintaining but celebrating the Catholic faith which is ever ancient and ever new. At this moment of the life of the Church may the Holy Spirit reawaken hope in those who come like Nicodemus to hear that good news, and determination and patience on our part to lift up the Son of Man in our words and works as agents of his resurrection life.