

4th Sunday of Lent (B)
(2Chronicles 36:14-16.19-23 / John 3:14-21)
14.03.2021
Questions?

The late Cistercian monk Basil Pennington wrote: “Lent is a time to ask the deep questions and begin to live in those deep questions” (*Listen...*, p. 163). If he is right, then Nicodemus who is mentioned at the beginning of our Gospel reading today is a good travelling companion for our Lenten season.

This discreet yet important character appears only 3 times in John’s Good News account, yet it is always at key moments in the development of the Gospel narrative. In John 3, Nicodemus visits Jesus by night to ask him questions about his identity and mission; in John 7:51, as the priests and Pharisees debate what to do about Jesus, Nicodemus challenges them with a question; and in John 19:39, Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus.

What is striking is that Nicodemus is remembered by the first Christian community as the one who, on one hand, buried Jesus and, on the other hand, asks questions. This last aspect may explain why Wikipedia lists him as the patron saint of curious people!

Nicodemus the questioner is in good company with Jesus. In the four Gospels, we are told that Jesus asked more than three hundred questions (even if we eliminate the parallel texts of the Synoptic Gospels, two hundred questions remain). In John’s Gospel, we find also that people around Jesus ask him a lot of questions: “What must we do to perform the work of God?” (6:28), “Who is the Son of Man?” (9:36), “Lord where are you going?” (13:36)...

We could say that in the whole Bible we have a fireworks of questions and answers. In fact this is not surprising because the Bible is a dialogue between humanity and God. Questions and answers imply contact, an encounter, a relationship.

During our Lenten pilgrimage, since we want to go deeper in our relationship with God, we should ask him and ask ourselves the real questions about our lives and their meaning.

There are so many things that we do not understand, so many things that seem meaningless and absurd. The danger for us would be to think that we have all the answers, and so we have no questions to ask. Is that really the case?

Questions are more than a vehicle used to arrive as quickly as possible at an answer. If our questions are to accomplish something within us, they must transform us in such a way that we become able to welcome the answer we will be given.

Jesus’ answer to Nicodemus in today’s Gospel passage confirmed Nicodemus in his questioning. In the 8 verses that we read, Jesus used the verb *to believe* 5 times. We have to notice that, in his Gospel account, St John never uses the noun *faith*, but always the verb *to believe*. For the evangelist, to believe is to believe in Jesus Christ (in our Gospel reading twice over we find the expression: “to believe in him”). This strongly implies that for John religious belief is not a passive state, the formal adherence to a set of unchanging propositions, a lonely act of the mind, but rather it is something relational, it is a life of energy in which we grow; though the end is implicit in the beginning, there is always more to be discovered.

In our Christian communities, faith is often understood and lived as the definitive answer to any question that may arise, and indeed to all our questions. We are not encouraged

to ask questions, we may be told that it is not the right time, that we do not need to have an answer, or simply that it is none of our business... These simplistic statements choke the questions which arise in our hearts, and that prevents our faith from growing, moreover it hinders us from becoming mature adult Christians.

It must be said and repeated that to believe brings answers as much as it prompts questions. By its very nature, because it is about being in relationship with God, faith always prompts a questioning search for greater understanding of and deeper intimacy with our heavenly Father.

Faith does not exclude questions, questions testify to faith. We ask, not because we doubt, but because we believe. The Book of Job, the most searching of all explorations of human suffering, is a book of questions asked by a man, to which God replies with four chapters of questions of his own.

Jesus' call to believe is an invitation to ask questions. Not for the sake of questioning but, as appears to be the case in our Gospel reading, because we want to live. For Jesus, to believe is to live, it is to "have eternal life."

One sign that we are alive, one way for us to be more alive is to seek, to ask, to desire. As seekers, we are always asking questions. Faith does not give answers which will bring our searching to an end once and for all. As we seek, as we ask questions we must come to realise that every true answer is one step in a process which constantly leads us further on and prompts yet other, new questions.

As we approach the celebration of Easter, let us not tire of asking the Lord the deep and real questions which bother us. Maybe the challenge that we have to face is to be courageous enough to deal properly with the questions we can answer and be humble enough to acknowledge that there are some that will remain unanswered for the time being. This whole dynamic is a school of patience where we learn to live with our vulnerability and poverty. It is a school in which we learn to love God more truly, and in which we learn to rely on him alone.