

Trinity Sunday

Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8, Psalm 29, Romans 8:12-17, John 3:1-17

To be Born from Above

Introduction

The film *Les Choristes* or the “Choir Boys”, is a powerful story about the struggle to build a community ‘worthy of the name’ from a group of wounded, abused children, isolated in a Reform School, the name of which, says it all *Fond de L’Étang* (*Bottom of the Pond*). As occurs in such places everywhere, the boys are further abused, identified as problematic outsiders, impure. Into this dark space arrives a failed composer and musician, Clément Matthieu. Matthieu, sharply aware of the brokenness of these children – partly perhaps because of his own suffering – attempts to do something which no one else will – build community, build community through music. *Infusing* his own creativity into these boys, he encourages them to enjoy something together. *Instilling* his own energy into these boys, they begin to see themselves in a new light – no longer as outsiders, as impure, as stains on an ‘other-wise righteous world’ – but as people who have gifts, capacity and value. In place of being objects, they become subjects. Centre stage in all this, is the exceptionally talented boy, Morange: one with the voice of an angel, the single mother of whom, Violette, Matthieu, secretly falls in love. The point that emerges, that stands-out from this story, is the way in which this broken, battered, abusive place – *Fond de L’Étang* (*Bottom of the Pond*), for a moment, becomes something else, something entirely different: a place of joy, of growth. Clément Matthieu is a *life-giving spirit* who comes *from above* and disappears again, after he is found to be “too hot to handle”.

The Gospel: The Story of Nicodemus

This question of becoming a *life-giving spirit from above* is what lies at the heart of the story of Nicodemus. On the face of it, this is a story about conversion: as the term has it “being born from above”. But, we often miss the connotations, because we don’t understand the context.

The Gospel of John arises from a community of faith that finds its identity in its exclusion, its “outside-ness”, its feeling of strangeness in the surrounding reality, in which it is ill-immersed. For these Christians, Christian faith is a minority faith; and such faith is understood as a *signing-out* from the Jewish political, social and religious structures from which they have been ostracized. Being “born-from above” is all about a *signing up to Jesus*, rejecting the synagogue and its social conformity, rejecting the Temple and its purity systems, where some belong and most don’t; including them. To be born from above is then about *not being born from below*.

This is the struggle of Nicodemus. He comes to us, at first unnamed with the words, “And there was a man” (*ēn de anthropos*). This immediately puts him under suspicion from the point of view of the reader. At the end of Chapter 2, we have already heard the words, referring to Jesus “and he (Jesus) knew what was in man”. Nicodemus is such a man: not to be trusted, a shady figure, reflecting what is typical of human

beings generally – self-interested, somewhat narcissistic and probably just a tad sociopathic. Nicodemus, is well connected, a high-flyer, a man who understands and benefits from power. But here, he is in effect told: “throw it all in”, “let go of it”. To ‘be born from above’, then, is not about a detached metaphysical experience of conversion located in the heavens – the usual meaning afforded the term – but about an experience of non-conformity, an experience of dissent, of rupture from the ‘world and all that’. Perhaps, Nicodemus – the man who had it all, was tired of it all, tired of the game-playing, tired of the slapping on the backs of the elites, of the long business lunches, the payments under the table, and so on. Perhaps in his own way, Nicodemus was desperate for authenticity and truth. To be born from above means to break away from the establishment and its associated power. To be born from above means, not to be born from below.

The French Philosopher Jean Luc Nancy: The Need for Double Vision

The contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy could almost be speaking of Nicodemus in his thinking about what he calls “double-vision,” the human capacity to sense something beyond this world that alters radically how we understand ourselves in this one. He writes,

“Faith consists in seeing and hearing where there is (seemingly) nothing exceptional for the ordinary eye and ear. It knows how to [really] see and to [really] hear.” “To be a human being is to be open to infinitely more than simply being a human being.” “It means nothing other than being faithful to... this infinite going beyond of the human by the human”

That is what Clément Matthieu understood. He is a life-giving spirit who comes from above and transforms a petty brutal human community. This is what Nicodemus is called to...to leave behind his introverted destructive world and his part in it, and to aspire to what is grander and greater: to himself become a life-giving spirit. To be born from above...to be born from above!

That is what we need. In a world diminished by the Naurus and Manus Islands; by the banking and insurance scams; by the meanness of spirit toward those on Newstart and those refugees on temporary visas; by the deficit of coherent community-creating policy. Oh, for people who are born from above...born from above!