

# Thank you for the blurry vision

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Our reading today is a deep conversation between two Jewish men. Nikodemus comes to Jesus with a question. He knows his scripture and his faith and he has watched and listened to the movement. Now he is ready to find out more.

I have always thought that evangelism is like meeting cats – if you ignore them, they will be curious enough to come to you. I discovered why.

Last night I read a quote from Gandhi talking to a Christian missionary...

Let us think of the bulk of your people who preach the gospel. Do they spread the perfume of their lives? That is to me the sole criterion. All I want them to do is to live as Christians, not annotate them.

This says something about how evangelism is seen, more often than not, as duplicitous because we tell others how to live ... instead of us learning to live. Gandhi was a bit dark on evangelism. He thought it would be much more compelling to stop talking and start doing – his suggestion was if they were serious, they would have joined the spinning circles.

Importantly, it is an insight into our own faith offered by a stranger. We need these opportunities to see ourselves through the prisms of other people's eyes.

Nikodemus' conversation is significant to both of them as it alerts Jesus to how an orthodox Jew sees what he is doing and what doesn't make sense to the outsider.

We are enriched by others' views and also sobered. It is more than walking in their shoes, it is literally seeing the world through their eyes.

I remember when my friend Carl came to visit me in the 1970s. I lived in Bondi and he was on leave from Vietnam. Carl and I were kindergarten playmates. I had a young baby and we wanted to go to the beach. I stayed to feed Sam and Carl was going ahead to grab a spot. "How will I find you?", I asked. "Well, he said, it's not like looking for a needle in a haystack.

When I got to the promenade I looked up and down the beach. There was one black man in a dayglow orange budgie and a circle of empty, white sand 3

metres a side. The rest of the beach was blanket to blanket. It was the only empty space on the shore.

In her book, *Becoming*, Michelle Obama talked about what it was like to be one of about 5 black kids at her university. In the end, they huddled together because apart they were too obvious. In her book, we got to be part of her every day, blue collar, working-class American life. When the girl from the south side of Chicago told her teachers that she wanted to go to Harvard, they laughed at her. She went to Princeton University and Harvard Law School. Her biography is not a story about being black. It is simply *her* story and in reading it, you see the world through her eyes and her family's experiences.

*Ten little Indians* is a book of short stories by Sherman Alexie. He's won just about every writing prize there is. His short stories are not *about* American First Peoples. They are short stories about life and in his life, most the characters are Native American. You get to see his world through his eyes and even learn some of the differences and prejudices that are normal in his world.

From having close friends of other colours, I am now aware of people staring all the time. I am also aware of just how racist our everyday language is when we don't even notice it. Expressions that were 'normal' to me like 'you couldn't sell it to a Jap on ANZAC day' scream at us ...now. An expression that on one hand, makes us very Australian and on the other, clearly names the stranger. Well, truth is, every culture has that blurred vision. Every culture has its cruel jokes about others. They have assumptions and prejudices. Lenses and prisms are how each see the world. You, me and the other.

Now I am reading a book about how an Episcopalian priest realises how her Christianity has changed because she has been teaching Religions of the world. The deeper insight into other faiths has made her, like Nikodemus, ask the hard questions of her own faith. 'It is very easy to believe, we are the only apple of God's eye'. She has come to understand that 'the unity of the Creator is expressed in the diversity of creation.'<sup>1</sup>

Jesus uses strangers all through the Bible to help **us** see *us* from the outside.

Jesus didn't help Nikodemus. In fact, I am not sure he wasn't making fun of him. He uses church language to exclude him. How often do we do that? And the last line reads as if he is deriding him for what he doesn't know. Or then,

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown, (2029) *Holy Envy*, Harper One

he might be saying, in a really obtuse way, no-one can know everything – only God. If you think you know everything, you are wrong. And on top of that, you have to be OK with not knowing everything. That's a good lesson to learn. For any one – of any faith.

Pentecost tells us, not that we are speaking other languages, but that we are hearing the word in our own language. The barriers have broken and the boundaries have become fuzzy. It's the Babel re-make.

Last week I was in a zoom training course about new modalities – processes to help us clarify questions and answers in spiritual direction. It's all a bit dodgy so I won't go into the processes but the one thing all the practices had in common was to un-focus; to make the boundaries fuzzy; to not look at the problem but soft focus our eyes and our awareness so that ideas, images or feelings might emerge from the fog.

When we walk in biographies and stories like Michelle's and Sherman's – we fuzz those boundaries. We become them. That's kind of the opposite of evangelism as we have known it.

God speaks many languages – not just with words but also with our senses. He uses many channels. Sometimes the stranger, sometimes our peripheral vision. Sometimes nature comes and smacks us into awareness....

Did you see the super moon on the water?

There is a fuzzy subtly like discerning the currents from the tide. Isn't that the real message they try and invoke in the Trinity? The blurred boundaries between human, divine and spirit? As Jesus said, 'If I am in you and you within me', then how can that be divided?

And if we are Christian, as in, we walk our faith, does that leave the perfume for others to follow?<sup>2</sup> It's blurry not bold. It worked for me. No amount of fervid evangelism corralled me into Christianity. It was meeting people I admired. People I wanted to be with. Communities like you.

We admit we have sometimes been divided from our communities, our friends, ourselves and God. We need to come to understand that what we see inside, may not be how it is seen from outside. What might be community to us is exclusion for others. We come understanding our human brokenness is

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<sup>2</sup> I know I've done more 'faith' walking farm fences in deep conversation than I have ever done in a church.

not the end of the story because we can hear anew through the eyes and stories of others. Reconciliation begins with those stories. Like Nicodemus, we can ask the hard questions and still stand on God's ground.

In knowing others, we learn about ourselves. So, thank you Lord for diversity. Thank you for blurry vision. Thank you for dream time stories.

Thank you for sending me divine messages in so many avenues I cannot ignore: In strangers; In languages; In moonrise and sun sets. In sorrow and joy; in my senses of smell, taste and touch. In my differentness and my belonging. In what brings us together. Jesus.

Shalom.