

Many, many decades ago, the federal government employed me for a while as a teacher of English as a Second Language on a Chipewyan reserve. It was easier than teaching English children who spoke Urdu or Hindi, or Chipewyan, which was where my experience was. With adults, however, there is another dimension: the difference between formal and casual language.

Some languages change the grammar and the vocabulary if you are being formal—such as referring to someone as ‘du’ instead of “Sie” in German, or “tu” instead of “vous” in French. English is less prescriptive, but it’s helpful for adults to learn that you say “How do you do?” and not “Hey, how’s it going buddy?” when being introduced to the Lieutenant Governor or the Premier.

Certain conversations are structured in a particular way that we recognize without giving it any thought. What we heard in the Nicodemus story was such a formal interchange, but not one we recognize. The pattern is that of a debate between religious scholars. Nicodemus was a Hebrew teacher who had come to discuss a religious point with another Hebrew teacher.

That’s really significant. Nicodemus was a Pharisee; a leader of the Jews; a specialist in the law and the scriptures, and he had come to talk to Jesus, a man who was shunned by the Pharisees. It’s fair to assume that he came at night because he didn’t want anyone to see him. But he **did** come, so he must have wanted to talk to Jesus, but he wasn’t so sure that he wanted anyone to know that he’d been talking to Jesus.

He had come to talk to Jesus about God, and was respecting Jesus as a fellow scholar. The proper pattern for this debate would be for one person to make an opening statement and the other to respond. Nicodemus started his opening statement by acknowledging that Jesus was someone unusual. He calls Jesus Rabbi, which is a recognition of status, and a significant compliment. He goes on to acknowledge that Jesus must be from God because no one could do the things he has been doing otherwise. Nicodemus has been paying attention. He’s heard about the things Jesus has been doing—maybe he’s even been watching—and he recognizes that there is something worth following up, in the healings and exorcisms and feeding thousands of people with a few loaves.

The next thing that happens is that Jesus “answers” him: he makes his counter argument that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Being curious about miracles and dispassionately discussing evidence isn’t enough: faith must touch his heart, the spirit of God must renew him.

Nicodemus counters that with a query about the exact meaning of a specific word. The word that means ‘from above’ also means ‘again’ and Nicodemus points out that being ‘born again’, if you take it literally, is impossible.

Jesus responds that he meant **born from above** rather than ‘born again.’ As in being touched by the Holy Spirit. It doesn’t have anything to do with the flesh; it is a renewal of the spirit by the Spirit. Just as you must be born in the flesh to have physical life, so you must be born in the spirit to have spiritual life.

But there’s another potential confusion in this response. The word for ‘spirit’, in both Greek and Hebrew, is also the word for ‘life’, ‘breath’ and ‘wind.’ In Hebrew scriptures the same word is often a short form referring to the breath, or spirit, of God. At this point Nicodemus seems to admit defeat: “How can these things be?” “Sorry, you’ve lost me!” or maybe just “What??”

Every language has confusions like this, and we often make them into jokes. If I were to say that Nicodemus can’t take ‘know’ for an answer, I might be spelling that ‘*k-n-o-w*’, as a joke. (A feeble joke!)

We know what we mean by “the reign of God” but people who aren’t used to the image might think we were talking about spring showers. Same with “the peace of God.” If you didn’t know the expression, you might wonder which piece we mean. And then there are words that are spelled the same but mean different things: is it a flying bat or a baseball bat? A clip that holds things together, or the act of cutting them apart? Language isn’t always helpful, especially when we are talking about great and unfathomable mysteries.

You can’t help but wonder if Nicodemus was being deliberately obtuse. Was he deliberately just picking holes in what Jesus was saying? We’ve all been on the receiving end of that: the person who picks holes in the language and the images of our faith by applying worldly logic to spiritual ideas.

“What do you mean by sitting on the right hand of God? What are they sitting on? What furniture do they have in heaven then?” Or, “If heaven is up, why haven’t we bumped into it with a space probe or seen it with a telescope?” Or perhaps even “How can anybody be born again when they’re grown up?”

But Nicodemus doesn’t seem to be insincere or derogatory. He’s just having a hard time changing the way he thinks. As a Hebrew scholar, he believes that there is a prescribed set of behaviours that guarantee reaching God, and he’s asking Jesus what set of behaviours he is teaching. But Jesus is telling him that it’s not a formula; it’s a mystery. He will only come close to God through the spirit, not through behaviours.

Maybe after this conversation Nicodemus just slipped away into the night, more puzzled than ever; maybe he stayed and talked some more. Whichever it was, we do know that Nicodemus became a believer: he spoke on Jesus’ behalf in the Sanhedrin and he helped Joseph of Arimathea to bury his

body. His faith became a commitment, and he was no longer afraid of the light of day.

And what about us? Do we leave this conversation more puzzled than we were before, or does it say something to us? For some of us the words “born again” are very meaningful; others of us, are very uncomfortable with those words. We all have different ways of thinking about, and talking about, our spiritual lives.

As Jesus pointed out, we can't see the Holy Spirit any more than we can see the wind. But we can see what it does and know when it touches us. We don't have to be able to explain it in ordinary everyday terms to make it real.

It is no accident that Lent comes at the time of year when the winter is getting stale and there are signs of spring everywhere. The sap is running and the days are getting longer. Early bulbs are already appearing and the trees have started to change colour. The earth is renewing itself ready to burst out into spring.

We are about to experience one of the great mysteries of creation, as the earth comes back to life with the springtime. We welcome this great mystery without having to be able to explain it and without doing anything to earn it. Isn't this just the perfect time to welcome the unexplained and unearned mystery of the grace of God as it touches our lives and hearts?

Amen.