

## REFLECTIONS FOR TRINITY SUNDAY, MAY 30th

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



John 3 v 1-17.

Henry Ossawa Tanner painted this depiction of Nicodemus visiting Jesus by night in 1898. Tanner is one of the most famous African American painters and gained an international reputation as a painter during the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This was quite a feat considering the status of African American people in the United States. He was the only African American in his cohort when he studied at Pennsylvania Academy of fine Arts. He travelled to Paris and exhibited at the Paris Salon. He became famous for

his depictions of landscapes and Biblical themes. (He had used visits to the Philadelphia zoo to practice drawing and painting animals.)

The painting depicts the experience of Nicodemus, a pharisee who visits Jesus by night. Perhaps because Nicodemus didn't want to be seen or was afraid. Night- a time in the Old Testament and the gospels where things are unfruitful, people wrestle with God, Judas betrays Jesus, people stumble, people seek the light...

Perhaps by night Nicodemus is confused. Perhaps his work, place in society or reputation do not sit easily at night. To put it metaphorically 'By day the nets are full, by night the nets come up empty.'

I wonder how much Henry Ossawa Tanner's black ancestry is depicted in his choice of subject? Maybe at night he wrestled with his past and present... It was during the night time that many slaves, nearly 1000 per year escaped through the Underground Railroad system to find freedom. So-called because people disappeared – gone to ground- passed from one safe depot to another until they reached safety. It was during the night time that slaves met to worship together in their own 'invisible' church meetings held in clearings during which black preachers would tell the story of Moses and sing spirituals 'cause we wanted to sing, pray, and serve God in our own way.' At night freedom was found...

Often our brains use the night-time to speak to us. Dreams can be our suppressed feelings coming out to tell us things about ourselves or our experiences that we have not stopped to listen to during the day. The night is a time for our brain to process the day. The night can be a time of vulnerability and wrestling with the questions of life and also a time of revelation.

Perhaps it is in the night time that Nicodemus is reborn as he wrestles with the questions before Jesus, in the presence of God. Perhaps too we are reborn if we do not flee the darkness but let the questions shape us as we bring them to God because as we seek God, the night can be full of promise and freedom.

Revd Becky

## HYMN REFLECTION

For about the first five-sixths of the period of the Christian Church, **the hymns of the church were the psalms**, and latterly other things based on the psalms, by people such as Luther and Handel. Can there be a psalm suitable for Trinity Sunday, since the psalms were written hundreds of years before Christmas and Pentecost? Well, the **Spirit of God** moved upon the face of the waters in the second verse of Genesis; it was not a new concept in 33AD. God is **our** hope and strength, a **very present** help in trouble, whatever happens. The Lord of hosts is with us, **The God of Jacob is OUR refuge.**

These quotations are from Miles Coverdale's incomparable translation of the Bible, as in the Book of Common Prayer and as in the 317 quotations from the psalms in The Oxford Book of Quotations. In that invaluable decade when I was in the choir of Holy Trinity, Roehampton, we sang two or more Coverdale psalms every week, as the Gradual Hymn during Communion and at Evensong. The Cathedral sing all the psalms during the course of a year (not exactly Coverdale's words, but similar). On one memorable day to mark the Millennium I joined John Powell and a gathering of three choirs in Wells Cathedral to sing the whole Psalter in one day. Coverdale, of course. It is one of the greatest sadnesses of my later years that in this dumbed-down age of instant gratification we are apparently unable to do it any more. But as they say (roughly) at funeral services, be not sorry that you can't sing Coverdale's psalms any more; be glad that you did sing them, and that you still know them.

Please read Psalm 46 slowly and carefully. It is usually sung to a chant based on Luther's version of the same psalm, *A safe stronghold our God is still*. Ponder its flowing beauty, and think about its relevance to the Trinity and to today's church.

- 1 God is our hope and strength: a very present help in trouble,
- 2 Therefore will we not fear though the earth be moved: and though the hills be carried into the midst of the sea;
- 3 Though the waters thereof rage and swell: and though the mountains shake at the tempest of the same.
- 4 The rivers of the flood thereof shall make glad the city of God: the holy place of the tabernacle of the most Highest.
- 5 God is in the midst of her, therefore shall she not be removed: God shall help her, and that right early.
- 6 The heathen make much ado, and the kingdoms are moved: but God hath showed his voice, and the earth shall melt away.
- 7 The Lord of hosts is with us: the God of Jacob is our refuge.
- 8 O come hither and behold the works of the Lord: what destruction he hath brought upon the earth.
- 9 He maketh wars to cease in all the world: he breaketh the bow, and knappeth the spear in sunder, and burneth the chariots in the fire.
- 10 Be still then and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, and I will be exalted in the earth.
- 11 The Lord of hosts is with us: the God of Jacob is our refuge.

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