

Homily: Fr Sbongiseni Msomi

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St John Vianney Seminary

It has been a long time since I was invited to a wedding ceremony. Even some of the clothes that are usually reserved for such occasions are starting to become much too small for me. Only a fair few people are getting married these days. It could be the case that most people do not want to commit themselves. I usually hear people saying, 'I am in a relationship but I am not committed'. People these days are afraid of committing themselves to marriage (perhaps it is because we have highlighted many of the struggles in marriage and only a few people speak about the joys within married life). Not only marriage, commitment in general, even in our daily activities (such as diet for those who want to be slim, or for those who are exercising, to be committed to their time spent at the gym) is not an authentic reality that is lived out these days. Commitment! Even as disciples, we need to commit or dedicate our lives to Christ. To relate this well, the Gospel of John presents to us the scenario of Nicodemus.

Who is Nicodemus? In the Gospel of John 3:1, Nicodemus is presented to us as one of the Pharisees. He is the leader of the Jews and a member of the Sanhedrin. He comes secretly to Jesus at night seeking clarity. The Bible does not tell us about the commitment of Nicodemus in following Christ. He listened to Jesus, the Eternal Word, and the Word that creates and causes things that do not exist to exist. (What a privilege it is brothers that we ourselves get a chance to listen to the Word of God daily). However, it seems as if Nicodemus did not make a personal commitment to follow Jesus. He is actually impeded by his position and peoples' expectations to make a commitment. He cannot be seen publicly with Jesus. It also looks like he fears rejection from the Jews (Pharisees and other members of the Sanhedrin).

We also read about Nicodemus in John 19:38. In this chapter he assisted Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of Jesus. He donated some 75 spices for the burial. It also appears that Nicodemus is one of the rich people. He is willing to donate with his riches, but the Bible is silent about his commitment to follow Jesus. He respected Jesus. He was a disciple who had not mustered the courage to declare his faith publicly.

This kind of discipleship is what I would like to call today a 'Nicodemus level'. One can even create a term here and coin it as "the nikhodemasiology". We all pass through this level and it is a problem when we remain at the 'Nicodemus level'. I have heard people saying in the parishes, I am a Catholic, and they even say I belong to 'Parish A' but they are not committed, they are not even registered. This is not about money but about committing yourself to a particular parish, doing what others in your parish are doing. This kind of a discipleship is on the 'Nicodemus level'. Discipleship demands from us our total commitment to Jesus Christ.

A disciple who is committed to Christ is honest. He does not fake worship. A disciple who is undecided, unclear, who is on the fence, is still on the 'Nicodemus level'. An example of such a person, is someone who is driven by the approval of other people and to be unable to say clearly YES or NO; OR to be driven by fear and be unfree as a believer. Commitment also

means that one should make a decision: “But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...” (Joshua 24:15).

We too, as priests and seminarians, are called to this total commitment: to graduate from the Nicodemus level and commit ourselves completely to Jesus. Our God deserves the best not just the left overs. Commitment should be seen even as we worship the Lord... We should prepare well for our liturgies. Whether you are a Sacristan, a Proclaimer, an Acolyte or involved in any liturgical function, prepare well! That is commitment/dedication.

Commitment in the life of a believer, means I should have a sense of that which is good and life giving. I should prophesy life. Christ should be lifted up in my life. Listen to the Words of Jesus, in John 3:14 “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” If we go back to the journey of the people of Israel and recall what had happened, people were dying because of poisonous serpents in the wilderness (Numbers 21). Moses was then ordered by God to make an image of a bronze serpent and then lift it up. Why was the serpent not made in gold or silver? Why bronze? A bronze material has these advantages: Bronze can be polished easily. Of course it can have dust, but it can be polished and look good again, it can shine again. The people of Israel who looked to this brass serpent were reminded that the mercy of God is sufficient for all people; they were reminded of the wonders of God. A God who makes things anew and creates out of nothingness. We too, when we reflect upon the cross, should remember that the mercy of God is sufficient for all of us. This grace is sufficient even to the brother who has made many mistakes in the community. We should not be stuck, my brother, in the dust of yesterday. We can still be polished in the sacramental life and shine again.

Another advantage of bronze is that it is resistant to rust and can survive fire. This was to remind the people of Israel that when God and his Word is at the centre of their lives, not even flames of fire can consume them. Friends, when we allow God and His Word to fall afresh on us, to melt us, to mould us, to fill us, then we too get strength to survive all kinds of flames of fire in our lives.

A commitment to Jesus without embracing his cross is incomplete. Christ should be lifted up in the life of a disciple (through his words, actions). Whenever we try to commit ourselves to Jesus Christ we will encounter distractions, we will encounter opposition and we will encounter doubt. Pope Francis says, you cannot understand Jesus Christ the Redeemer without the Cross...“Life is not a Christian without a cross”. Maybe you are in this Eucharistic Celebration and you are saying: but I am trying to commit myself to my vocation, to follow Jesus, and to do things correctly, but I find myself falling. Present that to Jesus. Use this time of Lent to speak about your own struggles, about your own darkness. Use every opportunity for prayer to have a dialogue with the Lord. Our God is not deaf, He listens and He answers.