
#3 – CONVERSATIONS



Nicodemus Visiting Jesus at Night (1899, John 3:1-21) by Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937)¹, found at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.²

THE PAINTING

John 3 (NJB):

¹¹ 'In all truth I tell you,
we speak only about what we know
and witness only to what we have seen
and yet you people reject our evidence.
¹² If you do not believe me
when I speak to you about earthly things,
how will you believe me
when I speak to you about heavenly things.³

We know from the biblical text that this Pharisee (a layperson) was also a member of the Sanhedrin.⁴ Clearly, at least by public consensus, Nicodemus was a man of deep *learning* and religious *gravitas*.⁵ The painter accepts as obvious that it takes a *long time* to

¹ *Grove Art Online* (Oxford), article by Ilene Susan Fort: **Tanner, Henry Ossawa (21 June 1859 – Paris, 25 May 1937)** - American painter. He was one of the foremost African American artists, achieving an international reputation in the early years of the 20th century for his religious paintings. The son of an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) bishop, he studied art with Thomas Eakins from 1880 to 1882 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. He then worked in Philadelphia and Atlanta, GA, where he ran a photography studio and taught at Clark College. He also exhibited in New York and Philadelphia and attracted several patrons who sponsored him to study abroad. ... To assure the accuracy of his biblical scenes, Tanner travelled to Palestine in 1897 and 1898, studying the terrain, people, costumes, and customs.

² To be able to zoom in on the painting:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicodemus_Visiting_Jesus_by_Henry_Ossawa_Tanner.jpg.

³ *The New Jerusalem Bible* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 3:11-12.

⁴ **Sanhedrin** - The Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, as it appears in the gospels, Josephus, and rabbinic literature, has been understood alternately as the high priests' political council, the highest legislative body in Jewish Palestine, the supreme judicial court, the grand jury for important cases, the council of the Pharisaic school, and the final court of appeals in deciding halakic questions. [Anthony J. Saldarini, "Sanhedrin," in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 975.]

⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**gravity**" - **I.3. – 1509** - Weighty dignity; reverend seriousness; serious or solemn conduct or demeanour befitting a ceremony, an office, etc.; staidness. In later use with

become *learned*, so he had to paint Nicodemus as an old man. *Learning* is a work, the fruit of a long, consistent application of attention by a person, but *wisdom* is not a work, something that a person can make happen. And the proof of this is that it can come to those very young.⁶ Wisdom is a gift of the Holy Spirit, appearing when a person trusts God, *letting God have him or her*. Age has little to do with it. Our author writes:

Once a person is integrated, once his or her inner life becomes simplified, all of a piece, he or she begins to attain a richer and deeper knowledge – quite effortlessly, because the intellectual light that he or she receives comes *from above*. Freedom of heart is his or hers, and simplicity of intention, and fixity of resolve, and he or she finds that he or she is no longer distracted by a variety of occupations; he or she acts, now, only for God's glory, and does his or her best to get rid of all self-seeking. There is no worse enemy to your freedom and your peace of mind than the undisciplined affections of your own heart.

Notice the hunched back of Nicodemus, a consequence of his long years of leaning over biblical scrolls, studying them, searching the Scriptures and the meaning of the Jewish laws and the commentaries on them. Yet for all his learning, Nicodemus cannot figure out why Jesus, who was so much younger than he, was convincingly wiser than he was. He should have been the one teaching Jesus and not the other way around.

John 3 (NJB): ¹ There was one of the Pharisees called Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, ² who came to Jesus by night and said, 'Rabbi, we know that you have come from God as a teacher; for no one could perform the signs that you do unless God were with him.'⁷

Second, notice how Jesus' chest is lit up (the heart-light burns within Him)⁸, which light splashes up onto His thoughtful face. But *why* He is lit up is worth pondering. For all the grief that Jesus had had to endure from the learned men of Judaism, from his elders,

wider application: seriousness or sobriety (of conduct, bearing, speech, temperament, etc.); opposed to *levity* and *gaiety*.

⁶ One of *The Night School* guests of the Faber Institute was a little girl named Anna, whose story is recounted by her friend Fynn in *Mister God, This is Anna* (1974). The story covers her short life from when she met Fynn at 4-years old, a street urchin to when she died at 7-years old. Her wisdom was incandescent. Then there are the countless thousands over the course of human history who were vastly wise, who never had a single day of formal education.

⁷ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 3:1-2.

⁸ "**heart-light**" – Recall an experience of joy. Do you notice how it fills one's chest with warmth?

even from his own family,⁹ I am wondering whether it might have meant a great deal to Jesus finally to be respected, to be engaged as an equal by an approved expert, who finally, and without testing Jesus, humbly asked: “How can this be?” Nicodemus genuinely wanted to understand. Perfect; finally. Perhaps his lit-up chest reveals how much this conversation meant to Jesus.

TEXT (KNOX & OAKLEY)

3. HOW TRUTH IS TO BE LEARNT

1. Oh, to be one of those to whom truth communicates itself directly – not by means of symbols and words, whose meaning changes with time, but in its very nature! Our own estimate, our own way of looking at things, is always putting us in the wrong, by taking the short view. And here are we, splitting hairs about all sorts of mysterious problems which do not concern us – we shall not be blamed, at our judgement, for having failed to solve them. Strange creatures that we are, we forget the questions which really matter to us, matter vitally, and concentrate, of set purpose, on what is mere curiosity and waste of time. So clear-sighted we are, and so blind!

2. Why should we be concerned to divide up things into “classes” and “families”? We get away from all this tangle of guesswork, when once the Eternal Word speaks to us. From him alone all creation takes its origin, and therefore all creation has but one voice for us; he, who is its origin, is also its interpreter. Without him, nobody can understand it or form a true judgement about it. Until all things become One for you, traced to One source and seen in One act of vision, you cannot find anchorage for the heart, or rest calmly in God. O God, you are the truth; unite me to yourself by an act of unfailing love! I am so tired of reading about this and that, being lectured to about this and that, when all that I want, all that I long for, is to be found in you. If only they would hold their tongues, these learned folk! If only the whole of creation would be silent in your presence, and you, you alone, speak to me!

3. Once a man is integrated, once his inner life becomes simplified, all of a piece, he begins to attain a richer and deeper knowledge – quite effortlessly, because the intellectual light he receives comes from above. Freedom of heart is his, and simplicity of intention, and fixity of resolve, and he finds that he is no longer distracted by a

⁹ See **Mark 3: 21** When his relations heard of this, they set out to take charge of him; they said, ‘**He is out of his mind.**’ [The *New Jerusalem Bible* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Mk 3:21.]

variety of occupations; he acts, now, only for God's glory, and does his best to get rid of all self-seeking. There is no worse enemy to your freedom and your peace of mind than the undisciplined affections of your own heart. Really good and holy people plan out beforehand in their minds how they are to behave in given circumstances; the course of their lives does not sweep them away into following their lower instincts, they shape it for themselves, according to the dictates of right reason. To be sure, the conquest of self demands the hardest struggle of all; but this has got to be our real business in life, the conquest of self – no day passed without beating our own record, without gaining fresh ground.

4. We find no absolute perfection in this world; always there is a background of imperfection behind our achievement; and so it is that our guesses at the truth can never be more than light obscured by shadow. The humble man's knowledge of himself is a surer way to God than any deep researches into truth. No reason why we should quarrel with learning, or with any straightforward pursuit of knowledge; it is all good as far as it goes, and part of God's plan. But always what we should prize most is a clear conscience, and holiness of life. How is it that there are so many people who put knowledge first, instead of conduct? It means that they are constantly at fault and achieve little – sometimes next to nothing. If only these people would take as much trouble to weed out their imperfections, and to cultivate good qualities, as they take over the learned theses they propound, we should hear less about sins and scandals, less about lax behaviour in religious houses. After all, when the day of judgement comes, we shall be examined about what we have done, not about what we have read; whether we have lived conscientiously, not whether we have turned fine phrases. Where are they now, Doctor This and Professor That, whom you used to hear so much about when they were alive, and at the height of their reputation? They have handed over their chairs to other men, who probably never waste a thought on them; while they lived, they counted for something, now they are never mentioned.

5. So soon it passes, our earthly renown. Well for them, if they had practised what they taught; then indeed they would have studied to good purpose. How often the worldly pursuit of useless knowledge brings men to ruin, by distracting their attention from God's service! They must play the great man, they will not be content with a humble part, and it only leads to frustration. True greatness can only be reckoned in terms of charity; the really great man is one who doesn't think much of himself and doesn't think much of rank or precedence either. The only clear-sighted man is one who treats all earthly achievements as dirt, because he wants to win Christ; the only educated man is one who has learned to abandon his own will and do God's will instead.

CONVERSATION

Point One

What could our author mean when he writes of his desire that each of us “be one of those to whom truth communicates itself *directly* – not by means of symbols and words”? But is it not only through language (images and symbols and words and grammar and syntax) that we are able to think our way to the truth of things?

What kind of school would it be that had classrooms in which teachers never communicated “by means of symbols and words”?! Honestly, I am now enchanted by the thought of classrooms loud with silence, in which there were no words spoken or written, no gestures made. Utter stillness ... letting the “truth communicate itself directly” to each person, and through each to the others. What would we *know* after a day of classes like that?

The Trinity, by deliberate choice and with stunning self-effacement, communicated itself directly to us by becoming one of us, appearing in our human nature for the sake of establishing friendship with us.

John 14 (NJB):

I am the Way; I am Truth and Life.

No one can come to the Father except through me.

⁷ ***If you know me***, you will know my Father too.

From this moment you know him and have seen him.¹⁰

God did not send a book of crucial *ideas* such that we might study hard and learn how to get the right answers all the time. God, instead, chose to build friendship with us – to “communicate directly” through God’s own divine and human natures: “Oh, to be one of those to whom truth communicates itself directly” – so that we might communicate ourselves directly to each other: “Love one another *as* [i.e., in the way that] I have loved you.”

Point Two

What our author understood and which he was certain that many among the learned had forgotten or had never been taught in the first place is that *there are different kinds of*

¹⁰ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 14:6–7. Notice that He does not say, “I *know* the Way; I *know* the Truth and Life”.

truth (which is not the same thing as *different truths* – the toxic conviction of Relativists¹¹). Our author is emphasizing in this chapter the first and foundational kind of truth, which is *living in a relationship of a particular kind*, to which the Gospel of John refers constantly using the verb “to abide”.

How can one understand this? Consider how it is when a personal relationship of yours has gone bad, one up close and central in your life (i.e., you could not know the meaning of your life without him or her in it). When you both are out of sorts, even suffering a serious rift (and you hope only a temporary one), *have you noticed how this rupture directly affects your ability to think clearly about anything?*

This is not about one’s brain going wrong; it is about how one’s lack of love directly conditions his or her mind’s ability to think and to judge and to decide correctly. (Lack of love and its ill effects on our ability to reason is the oldest form of “brain fog.”) As a result, you each regularly misinterpret what the other says; you both cease to listen to and hear each other; and, more interestingly, you each begin to feel that the world has gone bad, has nothing faithful or true in it ... which of course is patently¹² false. **Love is the light of the mind.**

This is what our author in chapter three wants us to understand: our capacity to know the truth about *anything* is deeply conditioned by how our personal relationship with God and with our closest friends is being experienced by us.¹³

John 3 (NJB): ⁹‘How is that possible?’ asked Nicodemus. ¹⁰Jesus replied, ‘You are the Teacher of Israel, and you do not know these things!’ ¹⁴

Our author is particularly nettled,¹⁵ as Jesus was too, by the religiously learned, when they had replaced a deep, searching personal relationship with God for prodigious

¹¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**relativism**” – Originally and chiefly *Philosophy*. 1. **1865** – Any theory or doctrine asserting that knowledge, truth, morality, etc., are relative to situations, rather than being absolute. See *cultural, ethical, historical relativism*.

¹² The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**patent**” – **More generally: open, widespread, unobstructed.** 1. **II.4.a. - a1398** – Of a fact, quality, phenomenon, etc.: clear, evident, obvious.

¹³ “**is being experienced by us**” – God never gets out of sorts with us or fails to communicate openly and honestly with us. It is we humans who fall out of sorts with each other, which will always result in us falling out of sorts with God.

¹⁴ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 3:9–10.

¹⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**to nettle**” – **2.a. - c1450** – *transitive*. To irritate, vex, provoke, annoy. Frequently in *pass* with *at, by, with*, etc. Also, occasionally *intransitive*.

knowledge *about* God. Think of how a spouse may *know everything* about his or her spouse but has lost a feel for, a practice of, *a real relationship with* the other. Our author insists:

The humble man's knowledge of himself is a surer way to God than any deep researches into truth. No reason why we should quarrel with learning, or with any straightforward pursuit of knowledge; it is all good as far as it goes, and part of God's plan. But always what we should prize most is a clear conscience, and holiness of life. How is it that there are so many people who put knowledge first, instead of conduct? It means that they are constantly at fault and achieve little – sometimes next to nothing.

Point Three

The crisis of Truth in this American moment has little to do with our intellects; rather it has everything to do with our loss of commitment to friendships, built in the way the Son of God became human to show us how to do ... thus, *the imitation of Christ*.

Those with no capacity for friendship will be compelled by so lethal a self-harm *to make up truth*, the truth they want, because they are unable to know what is true, have lost their ability, or will, to tell the truth. They splutter and gibber¹⁶ words "that seem to work." The biblical Psalmist often references persons like this.

Psalm 2 (NJB):

¹ Why this uproar among the nations,
this impotent muttering of the peoples?

² Kings of the earth take up position,
princes plot together
against Yahweh and his anointed,

³ 'Now let us break their fetters!

Now let us throw off their bonds!' ¹⁷

Genuine friendship comes first; access to truth (the proper functioning of the intellect and will) comes second. This is what is meant that love is *the most practical thing*:

¹⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**to gibber**" – 1604 - *intransitive*. To speak rapidly and inarticulately; to chatter, talk nonsense. Said also of an ape.

¹⁷ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ps 2:1-3.

**Nothing is more practical than
finding God, than
falling in Love
in a quite absolute, final way.**

What you are in love with,
what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.

It will decide
what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you do with your evenings,
how you spend your weekends,
what you read, whom you know,
what breaks your heart,
and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.

Fall in Love, stay in love,
and it will decide everything.¹⁸

Have you ever seriously considered how your capacity for friendship, genuine, well-built friendship, directly conditions the degree of your intellectual brilliance and dependable judgment?

¹⁸ An exhortation written by Fr. Joseph Whelan, SJ, but made famous by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ, Superior General of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits).