

Lent 2 A February 17, 2008: Wesley 9.00 & 10.30am John 3. 1-17

This second Sunday in Lent we are presented with an intriguing conversation between two religious scholars. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a leader among the Jews, a theologian of the law. Jesus, called rabbi by his followers, is a teacher, and a theologian of the Spirit. Their conversation takes place during Passover, which was the most significant of Israel's celebrations.

Although he is already a significant religious leader, Nicodemus appears to be growing in his faith - questing and questioning, still; seeking more certainty, seeking assurance in what he believes. We could do worse than to take Nicodemus as our patron. He questions Jesus' openly and honestly; using all his God-given intellectual capacities to try and think about his faith and understand the message of Jesus. The result is one of the most striking conversations in all of the Bible.

There's something else that I like about Nicodemus; something that we can perhaps all of us relate to. By making the point that the two men were meeting at night, John wants us to see the symbolism: night is the time of darkness, when things are less than clear, a sign that Nicodemus himself is somewhat 'in the dark'. Things are not bright and clear to Nicodemus. God, his religious life and practice, who this Jesus character is, and how he should respond.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." (3.1, 2)

Jesus - Who are you? You must be someone special. But who are you?

Nicodemus is a man who has everything - and his is a well known and quite moving story because this man who has everything comes, in the cover of night, to receive something which he knows he cannot be without.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee. This means that he was educated to a level well beyond most people of his day. It also means that he would have been a wealthy man. In one of only two other passages in the Bible that refer to Nicodemus we find him addressing the Sanhedrin. No one addressed the Sanhedrin who was not without considerable status in the community.

The Sanhedrin was like a Senate. It was the political and judicial body that had authority over Jews within Palestine, and beyond. Nicodemus moved among people of influence. He was, himself, a man with a place in the world.

But Nicodemus, here, is the embodiment of an emptiness that comes when you have achieved much - over achieved, in fact - and yet your life remains shallow. Teacher, what must I do to be born from above?

And so, we are told, Nicodemus talks to Jesus in the night, hoping that Jesus is one who can remove his emptiness.

Like most texts in John's Gospel, the story of Nicodemus is rich in symbolism and full of statements that have two meanings. Having Nicodemus coming at night is but one of those symbols with a double meaning.

Language about light and darkness abounds in John. Jesus is variously described as 'the light shining in the darkness', 'the light of the world', and 'the true light that enlightens everyone'. Nicodemus is in the darkness, coming out into the night time in order to meet with the light of the world.

Yet the enlightenment he receives is unusual. It is hard to grasp, and difficult to understand. Coming to Jesus wanting to learn more about the ways of God and God's kingdom - Jesus tells Nicodemus to be born from above, and to listen to the wind. The theologian of the law meets the theologian of the Spirit, and it is as if they are speaking in different languages.

During the course of their conversation, Nicodemus seems not to understand Jesus at all. He takes the 'born from above' answer literally and wonders how he could enter a second time into his mother's womb. Like a number of other characters in John's Gospel, Nicodemus is a literalist - and in taking Jesus' words literally, he misses the point. In fact, his conversation with Jesus completes itself without us having been given any clue as to the outcome of it all for Nicodemus.

The point of this classic text is that Nicodemus, like all of us, needs a spiritual re-birth; an internal re-birth; a personal transformation.

As an educated person, a person accustomed to the law, he must learn to embrace the mystery of God. And as a person who has achieved a certain mastery over all that he has set out to accomplish, he must now learn how to accomplish humility. The two, to my mind, most important journeys of the Christian life: from knowledge to mystery, and from mastery (or the desire for it) to humility.

God is like the wind, Nicodemus, and the answers you are looking for are like the wind:

" they are something you feel, rather than take control of, or master; " rather than being something you can reach on your own, the answers reach you, if you will be open to them; " and like the wind, God will blow strongly at times, and at others will seem still, and even absent.

What is it that comes from God, and how may I know? How can I be born again, and enter the kingdom of God? Listen to the wind, Nicodemus, "[it] blows where it chooses; you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes".

Did Nicodemus come to that transformation? That re-birth in the Spirit? The ability to let go of the things below, and take hold of the things from above?

Even though Nicodemus misconnects here in this conversation with Jesus, there are some clues that he did.

Firstly, his very presence here talking with Jesus is an indication that Nicodemus has already reached an important place: recognises his need. And in that moment, he has begun the movement from darkness into light.

Secondly, I said there are two later passages that feature Nicodemus. Both of them give us a strong sense that these night visits to Jesus were just the first steps for Nicodemus toward that deeper personal transformation for which he longed.

In John 7, Nicodemus stands up for Jesus and argues on his behalf before the Sanhedrin. This is the speech he makes before the 'Senate' to which I made mention earlier. He makes it on behalf of the Rabbi he once visited in secret but now supports in this very public forum. He tells the Sanhedrin that it is not just for them to condemn Jesus without first hearing his side of the story.

And the second of those two readings is this: in John 19 we find Nicodemus alongside Joseph of Arimathea as together they remove Jesus' body from the cross, wrap Jesus' body with spices and linen, and place his dead body into a garden tomb. His speech to the Sanhedrin having failed, we find Nicodemus at the graveside of the one to whom, by this time, we may safely conclude, he felt he truly belonged.

Nicodemus was a man who had everything, and came in the darkness to visit Jesus because he wanted to find the light. And as a man who had everything, his story ends, ends, that is, in terms of what we may know from the Gospels, with his risking it all in order to take care of the teacher he met in the night. From knowledge to mystery; from mastery to humility.

Teacher, how can anyone be born again after having already grown old? Listen to the wind, Nicodemus. Listen to the wind.