

Nicodemus Meets Jesus

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Text: John 3:4 “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” ~*Nicodemus*

In many ways here is an encounter with Jesus that asks more questions than it answers. We know Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin (‘a ruler of the Jews’¹). Jesus also called him a teacher of Israel, so he was probably a rabbi. After this story Nicodemus doesn’t disappear. In chapter 19 of this Gospel, his name is mentioned again. With Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus came to claim the body of Jesus from Pilate for burial. John reported Nicodemus brought spices with which to embalm Jesus, a very large amount of myrrh and aloes.² New Testament scholars surmise there must have been various degrees of support for Jesus on the Sanhedrin, along with the outright opposition to him. At Joseph and Nicodemus must have been among those supportive of Jesus.

The best known part of Nicodemus’ meeting with Jesus is that he came to have his talk with Jesus at night. What did John mean to convey by telling us that in the story? Light and dark are prominent metaphors in the conversation and throughout the Gospel of John. “And this is the judgment, that the light came into the world, and men loved darkness more than light.”³ A common explanation for the nighttime meeting is that Nicodemus was interested to know more about Jesus but he had too much at stake to come to him openly in the daytime. A clandestine meeting was arranged. By my reading, Nicodemus was intrigued by this man Jesus. He knew all about the messianic signs and miracles Jesus performed. People talked about the young rabbi from Galilee and if he might be the Messiah. Certainly the Sanhedrin knew of Jesus. Soon they would send a delegation to ask questions and investigate Jesus’ orthodoxy.⁴ Nicodemus said to Jesus, “*We* know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one would do these signs that you do, *unless* God is with him.”⁵ I wonder about that *we*. Do you suppose some on the Sanhedrin believed Jesus was the Messiah? Or was Nicodemus just not the zealot that some hot heads were on the board? They were bound and determined to have it out with Jesus. Perhaps Nicodemus was the elder statesman trying to make peace among the factions and head off the conflict. As we know everyone in this story was a Jew. They had enough enemies without fighting one another.

¹ John 3:1.

² John 19:39.

³ John 3:19.

⁴ Mark 2:6-12.

⁵ John 3:2.

That said, I suspect there was something more behind Nicodemus' coming to Jesus. Like so many who study religion, there is often more than an academic interest involved. Many enter those fields looking for help themselves. He had questions of his own that troubled him. Nicodemus asks in the third person, "How can *a man* be born when he is old?"⁶ But probably we should read: "How can *I* be start all over again, when *I* am such an old man?" It is the personal that lurks behind his question. For many of us there is also a personal question hiding behind the books we read, the church we belong to, the company we keep. I suspect he was not unlike some of us, particularly me. He represented a group of leading, well-to-do Jews. They were attracted to this new teacher, but he did not want any lines drawn in the sand, at least not yet. Might he be the Messiah? As leaders, they had the most to lose if they followed Jesus and he turned out to be a fraud. Perhaps Nicodemus wanted to believe, yet had questions. He was a learned man in religion and had been looking for a messiah for many, many years. His piety was not just for show. Could Jesus be the one our fathers promised to redeem Israel? What would it look like if a learned theologian went to seek spiritual direction from Jesus?

There is something else we learn from Jesus and Nicodemus in their encounter. Jesus said, 'no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.'⁷ Nicodemus, the man who knew all about the ways of God in the Bible, the teachings of great rabbis, the miracles performed by Moses and prophets, he asked in response the most peculiar question. "How can anyone be born when he is as old as I am? Am I supposed to go back into my mother's womb?"⁸ To which Jesus replied, "How can you believe in God and know God and ask these things? I'm talking about something spiritual—something God will do in you—but something so life changing that it is like being born all over again. You have to become something new, Nicodemus." Nicodemus, like so many of his generation—like so many of us—had the advantage of knowing the ways of God and the promises of God. But becoming a disciple of Jesus is not about what you know. It is not like a late night college dorm discussion about God. Rather it is meeting God. It is the Spirit if God finding a home in you.

The problem for Nicodemus was that these were not the way he had ever thought about his faith before. The new thing was something God would do in Nicodemus, not something Nicodemus could do for himself or control. It was not something he could manage or accomplish by interpreting an old text or giving a rabbinic lecture. The radicality of it took his breath away. "I'm an old man—can something like this really happen at my age? It doesn't seem possible! What about all my friends who won't understand what I've done and what I gave up to follow you?" These are the questions and decisions that all of us, too, ask ourselves if we really listen to Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus was a man drawn to the Lord, but his existing knowledge of God proved to be an impediment to following him. As Kierkegaard might have said, Nicodemus

⁶ John 3:4.

⁷ John 3:3

⁸ John 3:4.

was standing on the high board and being asked to make a leap of faith. But it was so long a fall and the water too deep. Knowing and wanting to become something new, and yet, in many ways quite comfortable where he was and with the advantages he had.

Here is a picture of us, too. Like Nicodemus we have been part of the program of the church for a long time. But we have also been coopted; our minds and hearts have been shaped—not by discipleship—but by the world. And, yet, we are attracted to Jesus. We hear his call and want to accept it, yet we also hear the caveat, ominously. “You’ll have to be changed, become something new.” And at our age, who can do that? If you hurt enough or perhaps are unhappy enough, a new birth sounds great. If you are respected, comfortable, a leader—well, how much might you have to give up? Heretofore, we have used religion as a spare tire. We only need it when we have some minor trouble on the road. It is ‘just-in-case’ for the periods of worry everyone endures. We don’t really need a new vehicle; we just want to get back on the road with what we have. To us a question similar to the one Jesus asked Nicodemus must be posed: “How can you a minister of the Gospel, a member of the church, not understand?”

Nicodemus disappears into that soliloquy of Jesus, until after the crucifixion. I wonder about his thoughts that day he and Joseph of Arimathea went to collect the young rabbi’s body from Pilate. He had been involved behind the scenes trying to prevent the Sanhedrin’s act. Did he believe in Jesus after that night time conversation? We don’t know. Did he begin to follow Jesus after the resurrection? In the soliloquy, we hear the Messiah’s purpose for coming and dying: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not die but have everlasting life.”⁹ Like light brought into a dark room, some will be drawn to it and see themselves and where they are much more clearly. Others will shield their eyes and try to keep hiding in shadows. The salvation promised by Jesus is like that. Some will accept it and others will flee from it. Nicodemus is much like me, perhaps like you. As we wonder about Nicodemus, it is equally important that we wonder about us. Jesus’ message for us is really something new. Is there a place for something new in us? Do we believe in miracles—not just the healings and dead people coming back to life—but miracles about our becoming new people? “God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. [God] came to help, to put the world right again.”¹⁰

I wonder. Whatever happened to Nicodemus? What will happen to me, to you, when we have our talk with Jesus?

End

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⁹ John 3:16.

¹⁰ John 3:17. (*The Message*)