

When someone knocks on your door in the middle of the night it seems to bring a certain wonder or concern into your head. How heavily they knock, how frequently and the like can also do interesting things to one's blood pressure. At the manse we sometimes get some, shall we say, interesting visitors and calls. One can have some appreciation of how Jesus and the disciples must have felt when a knocking can on the door in the middle of the night. Jerusalem was a city under occupation and nightly curfews, if not the norm, were certainly quite usual. Moving about at night had its risks, not least from roaming Roman patrols. Like most pre-industrialisation civilisations, life went pretty much according to the sun, up early and to bed relatively early not long after dark. Light by oil or candle was too expensive for most ordinary people to waste. A stranger arriving in the middle of the night was a cause for some trepidation. What were they doing out at night? Who would take the risk and why? Was it a Roman patrol or arrest squad? Were they going to survive the night?

Nicodemus we are told, came to Jesus at night. Now this Nicodemus was a man of some note, some importance, some standing in the community. That he came to see Jesus at night like this is quite extraordinary. Scurrying about at night, as it were, with the risk of arrest or robbery was not something expected of someone of his station. So, what was going on?

This morning we are going some way to unpacking the account of Nicodemus and Jesus as told to us by the apostle John in John 3. It is one of those narratives that has multiple layers but as it stands it loses something of the gentleness, the humour, the intensity if not the importance in English. Sometimes what is not said explicitly because it is a shared cultural understanding can be massively important but invisible to outsiders. You all know in-language, especially between age groups and business, sports and cultural communities. Everyone has a different language and they're all speaking English! John's narrative speaks to us as much today as it did all those years ago because in it Jesus deals with us.

Let's begin then with what we know of Nicodemus. Nicodemus we are told immediately was a Pharisee and member of the Jewish ruling council. We know a number of things about Nicodemus from at least three non-Biblical Rabbinical sources. Like almost all non-Levite religious leaders of his time, Nicodemus had a trade. From a young man he had been a well digger. This was one of the most profitable industries in the region and had made him a very wealthy man, as well as keeping him physically fit and strong. He was also a trained Pharisee, meaning that he had a solid rote-learned knowledge of the Scriptures and some skill in interpretation and knowledge of Pharisaic scholars that had gone before. He would also have been very familiar with the hundreds of rules and regulations that society was to live by that had been extrapolated from the Scriptures by generations of religious leaders who aimed to protect the populace from itself. Unlike most of the Diaspora, the spread-out world of the Jews, Pharisees in Jerusalem read the Hebrew scriptures rather than the popular Greek Septuagint translation. Now an older man Nicodemus' career had achieved almost all that a man could achieve. He was married, he had to be to be a Pharisee, and reputedly had a charming daughter. He had been, or was the head Rabbi of a Biblical school and even more significant as we will come to shortly. By coming to Jesus at night Nicodemus seem to do something very, very much out of character. What was so important to him that he would act this way?

Jesus, by contrast, had done relatively little. When you recognise that this narrative takes place in just the third chapter of John's gospel, even comparing with Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus had done very little compared with what would come later. Yes, He had turned water into wine. Yes, he had called a small number of disciples. Yes, He had come to Jerusalem and cleaned out the Temple. No doubt that caught people's attention and probably not to favourably. And yes people had begun to believe in Him seeing the signs that He did, although

what this refers to is unclear. But in the wider scheme of things Jesus had done very little when Nicodemus sought Him out. What had caught Nicodemus' attention?

Rather than thinking of Bible incidents in isolation it is helpful to consider them in their wider context. In the widest sense the Jewish religious leaders were waiting to see what God was going to do. Some had all but given up hope of anything dramatic and looked to their own ways and means to get by. Others had come to political accommodations with the Romans to maintain their power and position. Yet others had fled to the deserts, like the Essenes at Qumran, to set up alternative communities. And others existed alongside and within all of the above faithfully hoping and waiting for God to reveal Himself and the Messiah to return. Not unlike, I suggest, Christians today – they see those who put up a pretence of faith, those who go through the motions, those who have given up, those who have brought into the world and that remnant that always remain faithful, waiting and hoping, within every community of faith, for Messiah to come, to reveal Himself.

Nicodemus, with all his experience, education and wisdom was one of the true faithful, a man seeking and watching for Messiah to come. As a member of the Ruling Council, the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus would have been privy to knowledge of the investigation into John the Baptist. He would have learned that John prepared people for, and pointed people to, the Coming Messiah who John subsequently identified as Jesus. As a very fit and able man, capable of travel and well educated, Nicodemus may have been one of those commissioned to go and follow John around, questioning and testing him. Nicodemus may have learned of Jesus or even been there at His baptism, but we cannot know. Whatever the source of his insight, or maybe after Nicodemus saw Jesus casting out the money changers in the Temple, Nicodemus needed to see Jesus. No publicly, not in a confrontational setting, not as a spectator to some spectacular miracle or event but man to man. One on one, the way we all need to come to Jesus. Nicodemus takes the risk and comes to Jesus at night, alone, risking reputation and body, because he considers it worth it if what he suspects is true.

On meeting Jesus, Nicodemus' words are telling, **“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”** Nicodemus calls Jesus a Rabbi, a teacher, a man of religious worth and honour. He acknowledges that what he has seen and heard of Jesus' works must carry the blessing and power of God. But it is an open-ended statement waiting for Jesus' response, His confirmation or something else. Whatever Jesus' thought of this senior statesman turning up on His doorstep in the middle of the night His response is both respectful and goes straight to the heart of the matter with no messing around. He acknowledges Nicodemus' sincerity, intuitively knowing Nicodemus' passion to see the Kingdom of God and what he lacks, to be born again. Jesus says to him, **“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”** Just like Nicodemus's opening statement, this is an open-ended challenge that begs response. Nicodemus's response is both a puzzled query and then tinged with humour and speaks far more than the few words he utters, **“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!”**

The term “born again” that Christians, particularly in the 1980's, used of coming to an alive faith comes from this passage. But for a Jewish man like Nicodemus the term had much greater significance. There were six times that, in Pharisaic Judaism, a man was said to be born again. Two of these Nicodemus could never qualify for: being a gentile converting to Judaism and being crowned as King of Israel. Of the next four, three were relatively straight-forward. Nicodemus would have come to age around 13 year and had his Bar Mitzvah. For girls this is called at Bat Mitzvah. He would have been married as he had to be to become a Pharisee, and he was a Rabbi. The final of the ways to be born again was even more significant. The final way was to become Rash Yeshivah. This is the Hebrew term for being the head of a seminar, a religious school. Later in the conversation Jesus refers to Nicodemus as the teacher of Israel. Not a *teacher* but the teacher – a reference to being the head of the greatest of the religious

schools in Jerusalem, the Rabbinic Seminary. Nicodemus had been born again every way he knew possible so his response to Jesus is humorous – do I have to go back to the womb and do it all again? “What have I missed?”, is what he is really asking. If we understand this whole conversation in light of the Jewish learning model of constantly posing questions, we can see what is going on quite clearly. Jesus would have loved it, deep, real, meaningful engagement with a Pharisee who really did have a heart for the things of God. But he still had a lot to learn. I wish we could see this scene it would have been incredibly touching.

Leviticus 19:32 states, **“Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord.”** The apostle Paul would later instruct Timothy his disciple, **“Never speak harshly to an older man, but appeal to him respectfully as you would to your own father ... treat older women as you would your mother...”** (1 Timothy 5:1-3). Respect for one’s elders was something that was a norm of Jewish life. Jesus shows respect for Nicodemus yet at the same time Jesus needs to engage him so that Nicodemus will move on in his thinking and understanding to a better place. Anyone who has dealt with older or elderly people knows that this is not always an easy thing to do, particularly if the change is significant. Here was Nicodemus, not ‘A’ teacher but ‘THE’ teacher of Israel, the most senior academic in Israel and he had missed something critical, something vital. His knowledge of the Spirit was all but missing, certainly at the level of a personal relationship with God, even though his heart was in the right place. How close but how far away. Jesus was moved for him in the most loving of ways.

What are the lessons that Nicodemus needs to learn? Firstly, that God’s ways are not as orderly and seemly as an academic might want them to be. The Spirit moves as God wills and is not beholden to human instruction or systems of order. There is a freedom and power there beyond what Nicodemus can imagine. Secondly, great faith has great cost and no more so than for the Son of Man. The Hebrew leadership looked to the Conquering King coming to restore Israel to its former and greater glory as ruler of the earth. But the scholars have missed the fact that before this can happen God, through the Son of Man, must make atonement for sin and this will come at great cost. A personal cost to the Messiah. As Moses raised up the snake on a pole so too the Messiah would be sacrificed for the people, a symbol of evil being put to death forever. Great gain would come, but at great cost and Jesus would bear that cost in His person. Salvation will come, not by works, not by obedience to the Law but by receiving the gift of God through believing in the Son.

This was not an answer to Nicodemus’ question or questions, it was a challenge for Nicodemus to engage. An invitation to a journey. One of the most moving things we can see is that this great Teacher did engage. He followed Jesus and was there at Jesus death to witness and take His body down for burial. Rabbinic sources record the story of Nicodemus scathingly as after the resurrection and the period of persecution of the Christians Nicodemus was scorned by the Jewish community, bankrupted and he and his daughter were forced to live on the streets. The Rabbi’s held up Nicodemus as an example of what happens when you become a Christian. What they failed to see was what kept Nicodemus and his family strong in faith, apart from the strong Christian community in Jerusalem. Nicodemus clearly found what he, a man of faith, was looking for in Jesus. He learnt that suffering could come but in faith it would lead to great reward. The things of this world were worth bearing because a relation with Jesus, with the risen Messiah he had met and talked with, that he knew, was worth more than anything that could be taken from him or thrown at him.

Nicodemus is an inspiration in faith. A man who was humble enough to know he didn’t know it all and in fact, in life, had been missing out on one of the greatest relationships you could have. In Jesus he found everything he was searching for and a freedom in the Spirit he didn’t know was possible. He also found something that put the things of this world into perspective and was worth giving up everything for. He truly found Jesus.

Amen