

The Problem With Nicodemus

(John 3.1-10)

Grant Bullen

Questioning

Today we hear the story of Nicodemus who visits Jesus secretly... 'by night'. He comes with questions.

It's OK to ask questions about God... about faith... even to ask questions of God. Our Anglican tradition of Christianity embraces questions... our faith journey is one of constant exploration and growth.

But... there's a problem with Nicodemus!

The Problem with Nicodemus

Generally he gets a pretty good press... He's seen as someone who's on the road to discipleship... an *almost-disciple*. Sure he's not quite there yet... but at least he's trying. But that's *not* how *John's* Gospel paints him. Let's look at some of the details...

And while we do, we need to hear the voice of *John's* church in the background... the new Christians from which this gospel emerged. We don't know a lot of details but we do know they were critical of the apostolic leadership group centred in Jerusalem – Peter, James and that lot. Because they believed following Christ meant a radical break from the old life... and they were suspicious of the sort of accommodations and compromises the 'elite' end up making.ⁱ

Let's look at what *John* tells us about Nicodemus...

The big give-away is that Nicodemus comes to Jesus *“by night”*. OK... so he’s an important Jewish leader in Jerusalem, probably a member of the Temple Sanhedrin, and he doesn’t want to be seen showing an interest in Jesus... Yes... but it’s more than that. *‘Night’* in *John’s Gospel* *always* refers to the cloak of darkness behind which evil or weak men hide their shame... Remember the words that follow *John’s* description of Judas leaving the Last Supper to betray Jesus? *“... he immediately went out. **And it was night!**”* There is something shameful going on in today’s gospel.

Look closely at the actual conversation. Nicodemus begins with the empty words of patriarchal flattery, *“Rabbi, we know you’re a teacher from God because otherwise you wouldn’t be able to do all these wonderful signs!”* (2) Jesus despised such flattery and *John’s* just finished telling us that Jesus would never trust those who were merely impressed with his ‘miracles’. (2.23-25) So this is *not* a good start! And in the background we hear the voice of *John’s* church yelling... *‘Well if you think he’s so wonderful, why are you skulking around in the dark? If you’ve seen the signs, why aren’t you in the daylight declaring where you stand?’* ⁱⁱ

When Jesus challenges him to make a radical new beginning... using the metaphor of being ‘born again’, (3) Nicodemus says, *‘Well that’s all very interesting... but how can any grown man be born again? Do you expect one to crawl back inside their mother’s womb and pop out again? How amusing!’* (4) He *might* be genuinely interested... who knows... but he’s certainly protecting himself... closing ‘the door’... by taking Jesus literally (always a good way to deflect a challenge). He’s playing a clever intellectual game, not opening himself to truth. Again, imagine the howls from *John’s* church... *‘Oh you self-inflated prig. We know your type!’* Indeed the final words of Jesus to Nicodemus in the text *are* pretty dismissive... *‘You call yourself a teacher of the people... but you haven’t got the first idea have you.’* (10)ⁱⁱⁱ This is a conversation that hasn’t gone well!

Are you convinced yet? There’s more...

Nicodemus is one of the few gospel characters we get to do a longitudinal study on. We actually get to see him again at the end of the story, and we can see how he’s developed over the three years. Well, sadly in Nic’s case... he hasn’t developed at all!

He turns up at the end of the gospel, in the company of Joseph of Arimathea, (a *secret* disciple because he's afraid of the consequences), to attend to the burial of the crucified Jesus. (19.38) ^{iv} Once again, Nicodemus generally gets favourable press for this action. *'He may not be able to declare his faith openly... but at least he buried the body... at least he's trying!* But that's not the picture *John* paints...

Nicodemus, as a member of the Temple elite, has been there when Jesus' murder was planned... perhaps even there at his trial. He was there, and he didn't protest, didn't make a stand for Jesus... even if he thought it was wrong. ^v

And there's something *'not right'* about the hasty burial. How did they get access to the body? What deal have they done to get this unusual privilege? The whole thing smells of collaboration – with Pilate and the Temple – getting rid of the body quickly and putting a great stone across the entrance so that's the end of the Jesus story.

The church that spawned *John's Gospel* had learned not to trust leaders who wanted to have a 'bet each way'... who wanted to have a foot in both camps. They despised *secret disciples*. They were clear... the time of questioning and exploring comes to an end. And then you have to decide... will you follow Jesus openly and full-heartedly or not? You can't spend your life dabbling.

'At Least I Tried'

I find seeing Nicodemus in this light, disturbing. I *prefer* the kinder reading... Because you see, it's something I often say to justify my own dabbling... my own half-hearted following of Jesus... *'Well at least I'm trying!'*

I have memories of too many times when I've stood complicit in the crowd and watched some injustice perpetrated... soothing my conscience because I did at least make *some* (token) effort to say something... *'At least I tried!'*

Of course we *never* achieve perfection... we never get it right... we're always struggling and failing... and in the end 'giving it a go' *is* a virtue. But the danger is that 'At least I'm trying' becomes a convenient excuse for *not* deciding... *not* committing... *not* following. Yes it's true... I *am* trying... but if this becomes a convenient soothing excuse, then I'm stuck.

I'd like to think *John's* community might look at me with compassion and say, 'Yes Grant we know it's scary, but you've got to know... you'll never find life that way. You can't be a half-disciple. You can't spend your life dabbling. The time comes to be an adult and choose... to throw yourself in whole and committed... regardless of your fear. Dabbling can't get you there!'

Conclusion

And this *is* what we're witnessing in today's interchange between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nic wants to test the water... have an engaging chat... see if he can pick up a hint or two... do a bit of self-improvement. But Jesus goes straight for the jugular... 'Mate, you're never going to make it that way. You've got to make a completely fresh start. You've got to open up your heart and your life and let the Spirit of God re-build you from the bottom up... re-birth you in fact. You can't dabble your way into the Kingdom. This is not about a touch of Botox here or there – this is being remade by God... being born again.' Sadly Nicodemus hides behind his cleverness and pretends he doesn't get it. Three years later he's still dabbling. He's going nowhere. It's a waste and a tragedy.

Last week in *Lent 1* we heard about allowing the Spirit to take us into the desert to *empty* us. Now in the second week we hear about allowing the Spirit to *fill* us with radically new life.

I feel the haunting eyes of *John's* church on me... asking, 'So what is it?... Are you in or not?' I want to say, 'Well at least I'm trying'... but I know that they're not going to buy that!

ⁱ See W. Howard-Brook, *“Becoming Children of God: John’s Gospel and Radical Discipleship”* (Orbis 1994)

ⁱⁱ Remember the gospels were not normally read in private, but read aloud to a community... so we can imagine some sort of interchange going on here.

ⁱⁱⁱ I’m personally convinced by the scholarly argument that verse 10 ends the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus, and what follows is the start of a new section, spoken for the hearing of the disciples.

^{iv} He and this other *secret* disciple, Joseph, are clearly ‘mates’ with Pilate, given that they have access to him and he gives them this favour... which is dirty company to keep.

^v *John* tells us that he knew what was coming... *John* details the ridiculous weight of precious spices he just happens to have on hand for the burial – hundreds of pounds of expensive myrrh and aloes. (19.39) Not even a super wealthy man would stock-pile such a horde... just in case. No... he’s prepared for this day, ready to swing into action as soon as Jesus’ body hits the ground... Does he do it because he’s sad... or because he’s relieved to have it all over and done with? Whatever... he knew it was coming... and did nothing to prevent it!