

## **FROM DARK TO LIGHT**

### **Cooke'-Portsmouth**

**March 12, 2017**

**John 3:1-17**

Nicodemus is a complex character. He is introduced to the reader in the third chapter of John, described as a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, a judicial body, who comes to Jesus by cloak of night to engage him in theological discussion. He fades to the background in the text as the discussion morphs to the confusing talk of “birth from above”. Most believing Christians can quote by rote the text from the 16<sup>th</sup> verse in the chapter, “for God so loved the world...” But this is not the only appearance that Nicodemus makes in the fourth gospel. And with each appearance he grows less afraid to be counted as a follower of Jesus.

For me, Nicodemus models the faith journey that many take: faltering like a child in infancy; uncertain, curious and frightened; growing in strength of character as he matures and then standing unafraid to be seen as a disciple despite the possible cost after the crucifixion.

Nicodemus appears in the gospel of John in chapters 3, 7 and 19. We are introduced to him in chapter three, probably the most familiar of the passages that reference him. In chapter three he seems childlike and afraid: coming to Jesus after dark so that none of his colleagues among the Pharisees would know of his curiosity. He acknowledges Jesus as a very effective teacher, and obviously endowed by God with special gifts, but seems quite confused and at odds with the reference that Jesus makes to things of flesh and spirit and rebirth. He does not understand and Jesus seems to understand that Nicodemus is childlike in his ability to understand the new things that he is saying.

The reader is not informed how long the two talked; if they argued over the interpretation of scripture or if Nicodemus left convinced of who Jesus was. He has been used almost as a literary tool to introduce the discussion about being born anew from above through God's grace. But Nicodemus does not disappear entirely from the fourth gospel. He still has a role to play in both the gospel and in the life of Jesus.

He is mentioned again in chapter 7. Jesus is in Jerusalem to celebrate a religious festival and goes into the temple to teach. His teaching is so profound that some begin to wonder aloud if he might be the Messiah. Others were dismissive and judged him as disruptive. The Pharisees, having heard of his notoriety, dismissed Jesus as prophet and possible Messiah because Galilee in Nazareth was too humble a place for the progeny of the mighty King David. The Pharisees having overheard the impression that Jesus was making among the masses as a person of interest made the decision to send the temple police to arrest him. However this proved to have other than the hoped for result.

It would appear that even the temple police who had been sent to arrest him could not agree on how to proceed and returned to the chief priests and Pharisees without their prisoner. The Pharisees were quick to judge the police of having been deceived by Jesus' talk. The officers defended their actions by asserting, "Never has anyone spoken like this." The Pharisees go on to condemn the crowd as ignorant and accursed. In all too familiar reality the Pharisees model that those who do not agree with us are against us! Nicodemus, not liking the tenor of the Pharisaic talk came to the defense of Jesus reminding his colleagues that the law does not judge and condemn a person without a trial. A second time the Phaisees deflect the criticism from themselves and project it onto the one who does not see as they see. "Seek the scriptures for

yourself and you will see that no prophet will arise from Galilee!” Their disdain for the suggestion by Nicodemus notwithstanding, it is as though a figurative line has been drawn between Nicodemus and the rest of the Pharisees.

Nicodemus is beginning to find some strength of faith and character. Heretofore his colleagues may not have known of the conversation that he had with Jesus that night in chapter 3. And while he has not confessed to having conversed with him, nor has he now offered more than a cursory defense of the man; he has asserted himself: in the daylight and among those who may make his life difficult. They neither accuse nor confront him but they do challenge Nicodemus to search the scriptures and he will not find a reference to any prophet arising from Nazareth. If they do not believe them then believe the scriptures.

Nicodemus again recedes to the background of the unfolding story, but we can assume that he must have held some sway among his colleagues because Jesus was not then arrested, questioned, tried or punished. It would seem that the perceived timidity of Nicodemus who came to Jesus under cloak of dark is beginning to ebb as Nicodemus finds his voice. He has not declared himself a follower. But Jesus is free to continue his ministry for the time being.

His final appearance in the gospel is following the crucifixion when Joseph of Arimathea had requested the body of Jesus for burial. Nicodemus was in attendance having brought with him one hundred pounds of myrrh and aloe for embalming Jesus' body according to Jewish custom. The scholar Raymond Brown has suggested that Nicodemus was a secret disciple of Jesus. In John, Nicodemus comes to Jesus near the beginning of his ministry, defends him in the middle, and is with him at the end. It begs the rhetorical question “Is this not what a disciple would do?”

There are myriad other biblical characters who are more familiar than Nicodemus, and yet, he seems to mirror the journeys made by so many of us in faith. He seems to be straddling the middle ground between orthodoxy and the new way. Paul Hammer suggests that given the highly symbolic nature of the fourth gospel Nicodemus is a reflection of the period in which the text was written.

After the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by Rome in year 70 rabbinic Judaism emerged with an emphasis on teaching over temple sacrifice and ritual. It was a time of conflict between Jews who believed that Jesus was God's Messiah and those who did not. Today's gospel lesson from John 3 depicts a Nicodemus who is trying to make up his mind about Jesus.

Over the course of the ministry of Jesus Nicodemus transformed from curious quester, to defender of both the man and his message, and finally to empowered and devoted friend willing to risk himself as he publically acknowledged his relationship at the death of a friend. He began as confused and questioning and matured in the faith to confessing and acknowledging. There is much more to the life and journey of Nicodemus than the 17 verses in the third chapter of John's gospel, although John 3: 16 is important and sacred to the memory of many.

He matured from one who was driven by curiosity to have some of his burning questions answered under the secrecy of night lest his curiosity about Jesus be exposed, to one who gently and devotedly prepared his body for burial. Over the course of his developing faith he transitioned from cowering in secrecy to daring to stand and be counted. He came out of the shadows and into the light of faith.

What I like about Nicodemus is that he seems to embody those of us who may be curious about the gospel message; may even take the time to sit down with a respected teacher to help clear up the confusion. We may even be so bold as to suggest that there are some things recorded in scripture that we have a difficult time embracing as true and applicable in the day and age in which we live. Like Nicodemus we find the responses of the learned one challenging to understand and may even leave still in the dark. But something happens after the encounter.

We ponder, study, test, reflect and pray and the light dawns. Nicodemus came to Jesus well versed in the law and its application. He lived by the very tenets of the law that governed every aspect of his life. But in tandem with his knowledge of Torah there was this growing faith in the man and the message of Jesus. Maybe for Nicodemus there was the growing sense that salvation could not be achieved on one's own by merely adhering to the strict rule of the law. There had to be more; and as the gospel spread from Jesus to followers and into the world it taught that faith and works together form the foundation of faith. Though his illumination may have grown slowly and over time, Nicodemus seemed to understand this.

Like a gestating child still in the darkness of the womb he was alive but not completely viable. Once born into the light of faith he discovered courage that he did not know that he had. And so it is for many of us who struggle with the line of demarcation between flesh and spirit; life and eternal life; born from above and simply born of a woman. We too gain insight and courage when put to the test. We begin to trust more in the unseen and the intangible to give us the words when we must speak as Nicodemus found the words when he faced his critics among the Pharisees. And sometimes it is our actions that make the statement void of words as when he

purchased many dollars worth of embalming spices for the preparation of the body of Jesus for burial.

The life of Nicodemus was a becoming in the faith as he moved from the dark into light; from frustration to faith; from flesh to spirit; from an understanding of life as we know it to eternal life as we believe it. Thanks be to God for his life and legacy. Amen.