

## **Jesus meets the people**

### **Jesus meets Nicodemus**

[John 3:1-21]

One night Jesus had a visitor. His name was Nicodemus. He was an important man. He was a member of the Jewish ruling council in Jerusalem. You didn't reach that position without being very learned in your religion and very respectable. We do not know exactly how many members there were in the Ruling Council. The Council acted both as a ruling council and as a court. To try certain people, such as a high priest or a false prophet, a court of seventy one members was required. If allowances were made for illness and members travelling outside Jerusalem one might guess at say ninety to a hundred members entitled to attend. This is about a sixth of the size of the British parliament. We are also told that Nicodemus belonged to the religious party of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were well represented in the Ruling Council, but the Sadducees (most priests were Sadducees) were also represented, and the High Priest was Chairman of the Council.

Jesus was in Jerusalem at the time, which was during the Passover Festival (John 2:23). Nicodemus came to him at night. There was already antagonism or at the very least suspicion between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, and no doubt Nicodemus wished to hide his visit from his fellow leaders. We do not know whether Nicodemus was already sympathetic to Jesus or just wanted to hear what Jesus had to say at first hand instead of relying on hearsay evidence.

*My own experience as an outspoken person with controversial ideas is also that people will privately express support for me, and might even vote for me in a secret ballot, whereas they will be unwilling to show such support openly - either because they are afraid of being associated with me or because they feel out of their depth and would rather I handled the situations in which I am controversial.*

Nicodemus addressed Jesus as "Rabbi". This was a mark of great respect which originally meant "My lord". Then he said: "We know you have come from God as a teacher. No one could do these powerful signs which you do unless God was with him." (verse 2). Nicodemus, the learned man, recognised that Jesus, a carpenter, was a true teacher sent by God. The language also suggests strongly that Nicodemus regarded Jesus as a prophet, for who but a prophet would be a teacher sent by God? For Nicodemus the miracles that Jesus performed were proof of this. There is also a suggestion that Nicodemus recognised that he and his fellow rabbis lacked the spiritual authority of teachers sent by God. Their teaching was based on human effort. The plural "we" most naturally means "us rabbis". It is an interesting admission that there were others among the established teachers who recognised Jesus as a prophet, even though they dare not say so publicly. There are other places in the New Testament which indicate the same fact.

On other occasions when Jesus was approached by other people he was careful to ask them what they wanted. He wanted them to say more and explain themselves more fully. This was part of his approach to them. An example of this is the blind man Bartimaeus who I have written about in another chapter. Here, however, Jesus did not do this. Perhaps he felt that Nicodemus had already voluntarily stated enough. Jesus also ignored the element of praise or flattery in what Nicodemus said.

So Jesus immediately replied, and it was a strange reply: "Unless a person is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God." (verse 3). Nicodemus didn't understand. He said: "How can a person who is already old be born? Surely you don't mean to say he can enter his mother's womb again and be born a second time!" (verse 4). So Jesus continued: "If you are not born from both water and spirit you cannot enter the Kingdom of God. A child born of flesh is flesh. A child born of the Spirit is spirit." (verses 5-6).

With a little thought the picture Jesus used is clear. When a baby is born it leaves the world of the womb where everything is dark and sounds are muffled and it enters a world of light and sound. For the first time its eyes work and its ears hear clearly. The new birth Jesus spoke of is similarly dramatic. The Kingdom of God cannot be seen by a person who has not been born again. They are still living in the womb where their eyes cannot see anything. They may hear faint muffled sounds of spiritual things but these sounds are unclear. The Kingdom of God is a new world which has to be entered by a process like birth, a movement from one world into another, from an enclosing womb to a world outside it. Jesus spoke of seeing the Kingdom of God and entering the Kingdom of God - just as a child at birth sees and enters the world outside the womb.

Jesus also emphasises that there are two births. The first one is from water, or flesh, and the second from the Spirit. Some people see in the mention of water a reference to baptism, but I think it more likely to refer to the fluid surrounding a child in the womb.

Jesus continued: “Don’t be surprised, Nicodemus, that I have told you that you must be born again.” (verse 7) He implies that what he had said was really rather obvious. Isn’t it?

Have you been as faithful to the church and your religion as Nicodemus was to his? Perhaps you have and perhaps you haven’t! But Jesus says to us all: “Have you been born of the Spirit?”

Check it out. Jesus said: “The wind blows here and there. You can hear it but you don’t know where it has come from or where it is going. Everyone who is born of the Spirit is like that.” (verse 8) Are you like this? To me it suggests being unpredictable and not understood.

Jesus also told someone else: “Real worshippers worship God in spirit and truth. God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth”. (John 4:24). Is that how you worship God? Or is your worship just ritualistic like Nicodemus? Do you enjoy meeting God daily at home in private? Or is the Sunday service your only worship? Have you been born again? Or are you just religious? You must be born again. Jesus said it. Don’t blame me!

*Christians often argue about the meaning of being born again. There are those who have had a particular experience at a particular moment in time when they were born again, and they expect others to have had a similar experience if they are to be considered genuine Christians. For others this is too narrow an interpretation. The latter might point out that Nicodemus was an adult who therefore needed a conversion experience, whereas others have often been brought up in a Christian family and can remember no such experience. Those who can remember a particular moment when they were born again should not become complacent. Jesus asks us to look at the present and ask if I am today experiencing the work of the Holy Spirit.*

*I personally did have a conversion experience at the age of twenty. One of those who helped me become a Christian, Peter Bradley, had also had a conversion experience, but another, James Casson, had been brought up in a Christian family and could remember no time when Christ was missing from his life. For what it is worth I believe we have to respect both experiences, but in both cases we should expect to see evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This is not an easy way out for someone who shows no evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. There are many who have been brought up in church-going families who have no commitment to Christ whatsoever and no understanding of His ways.*

Nicodemus then asked: “How can this come about?” or “how can this happen?” (verse 9). I feel that at this point Nicodemus genuinely wanted to know. I do not feel that he is

being challenging. Perhaps for this reason Jesus feels that he can rub home the ignorance displayed by Nicodemus and that this will be accepted humbly. So Jesus said in a mildly humiliating and slightly mocking fashion: “You are the teacher of Israel, but you don’t know these things!” (verse 10). He then went on to contrast Nicodemus’ ignorance with his own knowledge. He put himself above Nicodemus, the officially recognised teacher. Nicodemus had of course already recognised that Jesus is “a teacher sent by God”. So Jesus said: “I can assure you however that we speak about things that we know and are witnesses to the things that we have seen. But you [plural] do not accept our eye-witness evidence.” (verse 11).

“When I talk to you about ordinary human earthly things, you don’t believe me. So how could you possibly believe me if I were to talk to you about heavenly things!” (verse 12).

“Furthermore, no one has gone up into heaven except the Son of Man, who has come down from heaven.” (verse 13). This is a stupendous claim. As always in the gospels Jesus used the title “Son of Man” of himself. So he is saying that he has come down from heaven. No prophet ever said that. Prophets were ordinary human beings who God called to deliver His message to various people. The closest they got to heaven was to have visions of heaven in which God spoke to them. Angels of course come from heaven. They appear at times in human form, but they are not like Jesus, born from a mother’s womb, and they do not stay permanently on earth through to death. So Jesus was claiming to be something different.

“The Son of Man must be lifted up just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert so that everyone who puts his trust in him can have eternal life.” (verses 14-15). The incident of Moses and the snake took place when the ancient tribe of Israel were in the desert on their journey from Egypt to Canaan (modern Palestine). (Numbers 21:4-9). As so often on their journey the people of Israel were rebellious and impatient complaining about their fate and blaming God and Moses. God sent a plague of poisonous snakes among the people and many of them died from snake bites. The people then came to Moses and admitted that they had done wrong in complaining about God and Moses. They asked Moses to pray for them and ask Him to take the snakes away from them. Moses did pray for them. However God did not remove the snakes. He told Moses to make a snake and lift it up on a pole so that anyone who had been bitten could look at it would live. Moses did as he was told, making a bronze snake. When someone was bitten and looked at the snake he recovered.

With a picture or parable it is often difficult to decide how many of the details should be applied. Here Jesus himself goes on to explain how the story of the snake is a picture of him and his work. He is not like the poisonous snakes sent to punish people for their rebellion: “God did not send the Son into the world to execute judgement on mankind, but so that mankind could be saved through him.” (verse 17). He was like the bronze snake which Moses put on the top of a pole: “The Son of Man must be lifted up just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert so that everyone who puts his trust in him can have eternal life.” (verses 14-15). And: “God loved mankind, so he gave His only Son so that anyone who puts their trust in him will not be lost but have eternal life.” (verse 16). Of course there is a difference. By looking at the bronze snake the people in the desert gained life for a time. But they eventually died. Jesus is the path to eternal life. There is also a parallel. The people in the desert had to believe that by looking at the snake they would be healed - a rather preposterous idea for us, but perhaps less so for people more accustomed to magic. All that we are required to do is to put our trust in Jesus. That is very simple. With hindsight we may conclude that when Jesus spoke of being lifted up he was referring to his death on the cross. It is unlikely that Nicodemus would have understood it this way.

In the desert those who looked towards the bronze snake did not die, but those who did not believe were already dying because of the poison from the snakes which had bitten them. Here again there is a parallel with Christ: “Those who put their trust in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe have already been condemned because they have not put their trust in the only Son of God.” (verse 18).

Jesus then leaves the picture of the desert incident and goes on to the general situation in which people live. “This then is the ruling: ‘Light has come into the world, but people prefer darkness to light because what they do is wrong.’” (verse 19). He then expands further: “Everyone who does bad things hates the light and does not come to it so that he will not be found out. On the other hand those who do what is right come to the light so that what they do can be seen because what they do is done in God’s strength.” (verse 21).

This is a challenge to all of us. Would we like everything we do or say or think to be scrutinised? How would we feel if our friends or relations could see everything we do or say or think? I suspect that like me you are pleased they can’t see everything. How horrible it would be for the whole of our past lives to be laid out. I wouldn’t even want to look at it all myself. So how humble we need to be if we are to come into Christ’s light. Thankfully God is very merciful. He doesn’t rub our nose in it all. He puts it all aside. But he does expect us to be honest.

I suspect that Nicodemus lived in a dark world of plots and skulduggery of the highest degree. Such is the world of rulers in all ages, especially when there is no democratic control. I doubt whether it was possible to become a member of the Ruling Council without being pretty dishonest, approving a lot which you knew to be wrong, flattering those rogues who had the power to promote you! That is why I think Jesus chose to speak to Nicodemus about light and good deeds, darkness and bad deeds.

Some detailed notes:

For further details on the Ruling Council, also called the Sanhedrin, see a bible dictionary. A good source document is the section of the Mishnah called “Sanhedrin” (Danby pages 382 - 400).

Verses 3f: The word “again” in “born again” can also mean “from above”. There is clearly a double meaning here. Nicodemus interpreted it as “again” and used the unambiguous expression “a second time”. Jesus followed this aspect through, speaking of two births (verse 6). However there remains the suggestion that the second birth is “from above” in that it is by the [Holy] Spirit. The language of “rebirth” was used in some Greek religious circles. Nicodemus may have been aware of this, especially as his name is a Greek name. Certainly if John wrote his gospel with Greeks specially in mind it would have been sensible for him to include this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. The image suited Jesus’ purpose very well.

Verse 11: “But you [plural] do not accept our eye-witness evidence.” “You” perhaps again refers to “you, the Rabbis”. “Our” is presumably a sort of “royal we”.

Verse 12: It is tempting to link verse 12 to what Jesus has said earlier. That is to regard what Jesus has said about a second birth as being something ordinary, human and earthly. I doubt this and prefer to understand Jesus as talking in wider terms about his teaching, meaning: “I have spoken to you on many occasions about ordinary human life but you have not listened to me.”

Verse 13: Interpreters have difficulty with the words “has gone up to heaven”. They apply well to “no one” but do not apply well to “the Son of Man”, because he had done the reverse! He had not started on earth and gone up to heaven, he had started in heaven and come down to earth. Perhaps we should understand: “Furthermore, no one has gone up into heaven except the Son of Man, who has come down from heaven, and therefore has been in heaven.”

Verse 14: The bronze snake was preserved for several hundred years. The Israelites adopted the practice of offering sacrifices to it! It was eventually under the orders of King Hezekiah (715 - 687/6 B.C.) that it was destroyed. (2 Kings 18:4).

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