

19th February 2023 (John 3:1-17) – Life Stories #7 Nicodemus’ Story: ‘Born of the Spirit’

I wonder when you find it easiest to meet with God? Perhaps it’s with other Christians – say at church on Sundays, or maybe as part of a group during the week. Perhaps it’s first thing in the morning, if you’re naturally an early riser. Perhaps it’s last thing in the evening, as you get ready for bed and say your prayers.

Or maybe it’s at night. The hours of darkness are often an ambiguous time for us. We may feel more anxious or stressed, as small problems seem to grow in the night hours. I’m sure we’ve all experienced that! And yet we can often feel a closeness to God, a desire to turn things to prayer, to feel his presence with us.

King David talks openly in one of his greatest psalms: ‘I think of you through the watches of the night’ (Psalm 63:6). Our walk with God is 24/7, day and night. Knowing that God is always with us is a great comfort. And the great comfort of our faith is that we can meet Jesus at any time – including, perhaps *especially*, at night.

And in today’s reading, Nicodemus visits Jesus at night (v2). It’s worth pausing at this point to ask why? In a pre-electric age, people were up in the hours of light and tried to sleep in the hours of darkness. Night visits were much rarer and more hazardous; but also more secret – and that I think is the reason here. Nicodemus is afraid. He finds himself strangely drawn to Jesus, and yet, as a respectable, orthodox leader, he’s worried what people would think if he was seen meeting this troublesome rabbi.

I grew up with the R White’s lemonade ad – you may remember it, as the chap creeps quietly downstairs to the fridge because he’s ‘a secret lemonade drinker’. Well, **Nicodemus is a secret spiritual seeker, and so he creeps out quietly at night to satisfy his thirst** – this time a spiritual one. And of course it leads to one of the greatest of all human encounters with Jesus, and arguably the most famous bible verse of them all – but we’ll get to that later.

This is such a famous passage and so many sermons have been preached on it, that today I’m not going to focus so much on the second half. Our current series is Life Stories, and I’ve called this Nicodemus’ story for a reason, because I want to spend a few minutes thinking about this personal encounter between him and Jesus.

Now, we know very little about Nicodemus except what we learn here and in his brief re-appearance in John 19 – but we do know more about the group of people he represents. John describes him as a member of the Jewish ruling council, which is the equivalent of a cabinet minister in government. Since the Romans effectively ruled Israel, their power was significantly reduced – but even so, he was a powerful man. Probably from a wealthy family, almost certainly well-educated, it’s no surprise that he visits after Jesus’ visit to the temple, which we looked at last week, when Jesus says what, to the ruling elite, must have been some bizarre things. He also directly challenges their authority by criticising the corruption of the temple. If anyone had known that he went to Jesus, it would have been political suicide – but he goes anyway, albeit at night.

This tells us something already: that Nicodemus senses that there's something special about Jesus. Indeed, he admits it at the start of his encounter: 'Jesus, no-one could do what you're doing if God were not with him.' Perhaps he holds private concerns about the way the temple is run; perhaps he longs for the spiritual renewal of the nation, and not just freedom from their oppressors. We don't know: but what we do know is that the crux of Jesus' conversation revolves around how any of us can truly become spiritual people.

And what it boils down to is that **to be spiritual we have to be born of the Spirit.** It's not something that we can manufacture by being religious. In fact the word 'religion' appears almost nowhere in the New Testament of the Bible. Jesus calls what Nicodemus represents the way of 'the flesh': the idea that we can live as part of the kingdom of God by working hard, by doing human things – obeying rules, observing certain rituals, and so on. It's not that these things are bad, and in their proper place, they can be very helpful; but it's still *human* activity – humans trying to reach God. And Jesus says: 'flesh gives birth to flesh.' i.e. even the best humans can only become slightly better humans like this – but the kingdom of God is a kingdom of the Spirit.

So what's the answer? 'Spirit', Jesus says, 'gives birth to Spirit.' Spiritual life is just that: it's life in the Spirit. Not any old spirit (and this is where modern culture is desperately confused) – but the Spirit of the Lord, the one and only God of the universe – whom the Jewish people knew as Yahweh, and whom we worship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Or to put it another way: only God can renew us, and bring us life. That's what it means to be born again – leave aside the parodies and the folk who write it on placards. To be born again means to have a second birth through the Spirit of God – and only Jesus can give that to us.

Jesus is the one who gives us new birth in water and the Spirit – the water of baptism, and the Spirit which comes to dwell in us. He goes on to tell Nicodemus that he will achieve that through his death, which Jesus describes as being 'lifted up' in order to offer life to us all.

We don't know how much of this Nicodemus understood. In the first half of the conversation he is clearly scratching his head – even after seeing what Jesus said and did in the temple it's all a bit much for him. But we do have a post-script, which suggests that Nicodemus really did take it to heart. Fast-forward a couple of years, and the death that Jesus clearly predicted for himself here with Nicodemus comes to pass. Jesus is literally lifted up on a tree, and dies the death of a criminal. Who is there to help him down from the cross? Joseph of Arimathea (who provided the tomb)... **and Nicodemus (19:39). And in that moment, we sense that Nicodemus truly was born again. Jesus' death, as promised, brought him life – the life of the Spirit.**

The same is true for us today. Jesus' challenge to Nicodemus remains as relevant as ever. He invites us to a different kind of life – not of anxious effort trying to be god enough – but of gift, of invitation, of renewal by that same Spirit, which blows wherever it pleases. That Spirit still blows today. Perhaps it is blowing on you now. Why not receive it... for the Spirit gives birth to Spirit.

And may Nicodemus' story, Nicodemus' life-changing encounter with Jesus be ours, too. Amen.