

DISCIPLESHIP - NICODEMUS

JOHN 3 v 1-21; 7 v 45-52; 19 v 38-42

Introduction

Part of the brief for our current series in Simple Worship is to choose a favourite disciple and draw out from them what we can learn about discipleship.

So why choose Nicodemus? Well, Jesus was prepared to spend time with him, so we should be prepared to. But also, in some ways, he is just like us, with frailties and strengths. He is not put on a pedestal, an unattainable standard, so we don't need to be afraid of him or be scared of being like him.

Last month, in his tour de force on Philip and the Ethiopian, Sean brought home to us how much of an outsider the Ethiopian was, excluded from sharing in worship with the Jews. He was not able to enter the temple to worship and he was also untaught in the scriptures, though he did possess some to read. We saw that he needed someone to explain the scriptures to him. Nicodemus, on the other hand, was at the centre of Jewish religious life and was a teacher of the law. In some ways he was at the other extreme from the Ethiopian, and yet, as we shall see, in some ways he was just the same. He still needed explanations of what God said.

What Do We Know About Nicodemus?

We don't really know much at all about Nicodemus, as he is not one of the major characters in church history. He comes into view unannounced, and disappears again without saying good-bye. What we do know is found in these three passages in John's gospel.

John tells us **3 v 1** that Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin. Generally in Jewish history, a sanhedrin was a court and could be local, provincial or national. At the time of Jesus, the national Sanhedrin had wide powers in civil and criminal law, and administrative authority. It was the national ruling body (under the King), the top authority regarding religion and the law. However, although it was the top court, its power was limited by the Romans. So, for example, it could not officially pass a sentence of death. This was significant later in Jesus' ministry.

The members of the Sanhedrin were important people in Jewish society, men of standing and reputation. They were the current and former High Priests, Sadducees, Pharisees, Scribes. In addition, Jesus tells us **3 v 10** that Nicodemus was a teacher of Israel, so he was one well versed in the Scriptures.

So at this point you might be thinking that perhaps Nicodemus isn't like us after all.

Nicodemus' Nocturnal Encounter

Considering how important this meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus was, a meeting during which Jesus Himself proclaims the Gospel so clearly, the account begins without any great build up or introduction. There is nothing to indicate how deep and meaningful this meeting was to be. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, **v2**.

We can only speculate about why he came at night, but it was probably for a variety of reasons. Bearing in mind Nicodemus' position, in worldly terms he had a tremendous amount to lose if he was seen with Jesus; his social status, his religious authority, his credibility as a Pharisee. Jesus

was seen as a religious rebel, a political threat, someone who kept company with sinners and unclean people. So the most likely reason why he came at night was fear of being seen with Jesus. Does that make him seem more like us after all?

Alternatively, with all his responsibilities, he might just have been a very busy man and this could have been the only time he could make it. After all, he was probably even busier than a vicar or a church warden, but with more status.

Another reason might be symbolic. In John's gospel we read a lot about light; light coming into the world, Jesus the light of the world, the darkness being unable to overcome the light. Coming at night could be a demonstration of Nicodemus' and the Jews' benighted state, their living in spiritual darkness in spite of having God's self-revelation in the scriptures. For all his knowledge and position as a teacher, Nicodemus did not yet see the light, he did not yet know Jesus. That is a stark warning to those who look to teach and preach - we need to know Jesus ourselves, not just talk about Him.

Nicodemus greeted Jesus quite generously, but not with faith. His calling Jesus 'Rabbi', or teacher, **v2**, when Jesus would not have had the formal training of a religious leader, was gracious and would have admitted a degree of learning and authority. His recognition of Jesus' miracles was perhaps unexpected, as the Jews had been demanding that Jesus perform a miracle to prove his authority, **2 v 18**. So Nicodemus was probably genuinely wanting to learn more about Jesus and what He was teaching. What about you?

Jesus' Enigmatic Response

If you listen to politicians being interviewed on the radio or television, they never seem to answer the question they were asked. Instead, they answer the question they would like to have been asked. And like preachers, they tell you what they think you should know and believe. Jesus was incredibly good at this. Nicodemus didn't even have time to ask a question before Jesus was telling him what he should have been thinking and talking about. There's no messing around with Jesus, He gets straight to the point. He not only cuts to the chase, He also cuts to the heart.

As a well-taught Jew, and as a Pharisee, Nicodemus was rightly expecting that God would establish His Kingdom once again, but he was wrong in the way that he was expecting it to be established. It was not to be a political and economic kingdom as Nicodemus expected, but a spiritual kingdom. Nicodemus would happily have talked about the Kingdom and the Jewish expectations, it was the reference to being born from above, or again, that threw him, **v3**.

The word used by Jesus can mean either again, or from above; in either case it requires a second birth after our physical birth.

You can imagine Nicodemus being very confused by this, wondering how the conversation had been hijacked by Jesus to follow this route, so it isn't surprising that he asked the obvious question that he did ask. "How can someone be born a second time?" We mustn't laugh at Nicodemus; without the benefit of hindsight and the explanation in Scripture, we wouldn't have been any wiser or less confused. But Jesus didn't say it to confuse. He was cutting away everything that didn't matter and was getting to the very heart of the type of Kingdom that God was going to establish.

Be Born Again

Nicodemus came to Jesus and was prepared to admit that He was a teacher, with some spiritual

authority, even a miracle worker. We too might be prepared to admit all sorts of things about Jesus. We might believe He was a good man, like the humanists; or a great teacher, like the philosophers and moralists; or even a great prophet, as the Muslims do, but Jesus isn't bothered about these things. He says to us, as He said to Nicodemus, **"You must be born again," v7.**

What does it mean, then, to be "born again"? In the world at large we hear of all sorts of things described as being "born again". Businesses, political and sports careers, even Christians. There is always an implication of new energy and vitality. When used of Christians, it nowadays seems to be used as a label to indicate more enthusiasm and liveliness than is perhaps socially acceptable or considered really necessary. As Jesus made abundantly clear to Nicodemus, it has nothing to do with a second physical birth.

In the prologue, **1 v 12-13**, John tells us that, "to all who received Him, to those who believe in His name, He gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." Being born again means that God makes us His children, He makes Himself our Father. He gives us new life, eternal life, by His Holy Spirit.

Being born again is here described as a direct result of faith in Jesus, and is not something we can achieve for ourselves. The new birth is something that is done to us and for us by God, and by God alone. There is absolutely nothing that we can do to help in this, just as there was nothing we could do when our mothers gave birth to us. Everyone who wishes to be in God's Kingdom, a child of God, must be born again. Everyone who trusts in Jesus is born again. A Christian is a child of God, so there cannot be any type of Christian except the type that is born again. If you are not born again, you are not a Christian, however moral or socially minded you might be. There is no such animal as a Christian that is not born again. **"You must be born again."**

We cannot call God our Father, Jesus our brother or Saviour, or each other brothers and sisters in Christ, unless we are born again, from above, by the Holy Spirit. When we are born again, we are born to and for eternity, born into eternal life, born into God's family.

Take note, however: God has children, but He does not have grand-children. You cannot become a child of God because of someone else's relationship with Him. You must have a spiritual birth, by God's Holy Spirit, to become God's child. **"You must be born again."**

Nicodemus did not understand at this stage, his mind could not grasp the idea, so he again asks the obvious question that we would ask, "How can this be?" **v9.** He needed more than one word of explanation. How like us!

Unfortunately we don't have time to look into what it means to be born of water and the Spirit, or to look in detail at this incident with the bronze snake that Jesus refers to. Suffice it to say that Jesus was using examples that would be familiar to Nicodemus and would help him to understand, not to confuse him. However, being born again is not a matter of our understanding, rather it arises from God working in us by His Holy Spirit, and this is entirely at His pleasure, **v8.** How can we expect to understand the workings of God?

Believe in Jesus

Jesus goes on to direct Nicodemus to the love of God. Jesus was going to die on the cross because God loved the world so much. God wants people to have eternal life and a living relationship with Him, rather than face eternity without Him. He is not a stern tyrant in heaven, rather He is a loving Father to His children. When John talks about the world, he is not just talking

about the global population, he is talking about human society, society which is antagonistic towards God, that is rebellious and disobedient, society that would rather do without God. Even that does not cover the range of God's love. Christ's death and resurrection brings freedom for all creation, **Romans 8 v 18-21**. In spite of our rejection of God, He does not reject us. How great is that love? It is beyond measure.

The words of **v16-17** are some of the most sublime, gentle and gracious in the whole of the Bible. They are so simple and can only be misunderstood by someone wishing to not understand. Because God loves us, He offers us eternal life as a completely free gift, and all we have to do is believe in Jesus. This section is a magnificent statement of God's love and grace towards us. How do you respond?

Unfortunately we do not have time to look further into this amazing exposition of God's love for the world, but Jesus did not waste words. He must have seen something in Nicodemus to cause Him spend time with him and to explain this love and need for new life to him.

So after this glorious exposition of God's love, how did Nicodemus react? The honest answer is that we don't really know. Jesus finishes His discourse and John moves onto another event without further mention of Nicodemus.

Bearing in mind that this event appears to be before Nicodemus became a disciple, this doesn't appear to teach us about discipleship. Except that Nicodemus came to Jesus. Whatever the reason for coming at night, the important thing is that Nicodemus came to Jesus. Whether he was afraid or busy, he came to meet with Jesus. He came with questions and uncertainties, but he came, looking for answers. Coming to Jesus is a vital step on the road to discipleship.

The second thing we learn about discipleship, in case you haven't got it yet, is that we need to be born again. This was the thing that Nicodemus was missing, that he really needed to hear. To some extent the Ethiopian listening to Philip was better placed to understand because he did not come with the same pre-conceptions and religious baggage that Nicodemus came with.

Religionless Discipleship

Jesus' words here to Nicodemus tell us that a disciple is a believer in Jesus as the giver of eternal life. A disciple is not a follower of another religion, a different faith. There is no hope of salvation in other religions. No religion leads to God, let alone all of them. The best adherents of other faiths are not born again. The only way to God is not through any religion but by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, the risen Lord, **14 v 6**. **"You must be born again."** This highlights the need for mission and evangelism.

Jesus didn't come to start a religion, he came to establish a Kingdom, comprising the family of God, His children, those who are born of the Spirit. This is the Kingdom which was so far removed from Nicodemus' expectations, which can only be entered by those who have been born again. **"You must be born again."**

Nicodemus' Nearly Faith

We next meet Nicodemus at the end of chapter 7. Here we see that he is prepared to speak out for justice, for what is right, as a disciple of Jesus should, in defiance of the general mood of the Sanhedrin. After the rhetorical question is asked whether any of the Pharisees have believed in Jesus, Nicodemus speaks up. Not to say that in fact yes, a Pharisee has believed, but rather to

remind them of what the law they profess to uphold and teach requires. He comes to Jesus again, or rather he comes to His defence as Jesus is not physically present.

Nicodemus does not explicitly state that he believes in Jesus, so at this point it is still not known whether he could truly be called a disciple. He might be, but if so he hides it out of a continuing fear, especially as the Sanhedrin's mood is turning ugly.

Even for speaking up about the law, he is mocked by the others present, so he probably would have suffered far worse if he had admitted to following Jesus.

Nicodemus' Fearless Faith

Our third and final encounter with Nicodemus is in chapter 19, where he comes with Joseph of Arimathea to claim and bury Jesus' body. It is curious to me that Joseph is described as having been a disciple in secret whereas Nicodemus has not actually been called a disciple at all. But for him to have come to this point, somewhere along the line, Nicodemus had been born again, by the grace of God. But how did two secret disciples find each other? There wasn't a www.secretdisciples.com website to subscribe to. It is possible that Nicodemus noticed that Joseph did not vote in the Sanhedrin for Jesus' death [Luke 23 v 50,51](#). Did Joseph observe the same about Nicodemus?

Nicodemus, a spiritual leader of Israel, humbles himself to become ritually unclean by taking Jesus' body. There is no indication of what backlash he faced for this public identification with the crucified Messiah he had been looking for.

Nicodemus came to the crucified Christ, to bury Him. In an echo of the wise men who brought myrrh to Jesus as an infant, now Nicodemus brings myrrh in such quantities as were only used for the burial of kings, a tacit acknowledgment that Jesus was his King, possibly even a recognition of the King of Kings. Nicodemus yielded great wealth to Jesus.

His fear had turned to faith and he was not ashamed to be seen with Jesus.

Jesus says, "**You must be born again. You must be born again.**"

Closing Thoughts

So what can we learn about discipleship from Nicodemus?

He is not presented as a perfect example, or as a super disciple who we cannot possibly hope to emulate. He is presented as flawed, as we are; as fearful, as we can sometimes be; as lacking in understanding, as we often are. Nicodemus does not appear to have been a disciple at the start, but seems to have been transformed along the way. We see some of the steps on his journey to faith. But he made that journey, he grew in faith and service to Christ. That is an example to follow.

We should not be too ready to judge whether someone is a disciple or not - we do not know what work God is doing in them or where they are on their journey of faith, but at some point it should become clear through their actions. Nicodemus' quiet, shy, timid faith was at one point stronger than that of the apostles as they were in hiding after the crucifixion. His faith was seen in action, as ours should be.

We should not reprimand or feel superior to people who have questions and doubts. As long as

they are honest questions and doubts as part of an honest search for answers and resolutions, rather than excuses to not believe, then they are good and healthy and to be encouraged. Wherever we are on the path of discipleship we will have questions and uncertainties. We must support each other and seek to help one another along the way. No-one has all the answers except God.

Nicodemus humbled himself - there is no place for our pride in God's service.

A disciple is born again, and has eternal life. A disciple must therefore live in the light of this, always with at least one eye to eternity. Our life must show that we are preparing ourselves, and are being prepared by God, for that eternity with Him.

Nicodemus came to Jesus, which we must do.
He was born again as we must be.

But the most important thing for a disciple is to know that God loves us. And He goes on loving us. And after all that, God loves us. Because he loves us.

And we must be born again from above.