

“Nicodemus”
Text: John 3: 1-17

Prayer: Let us ponder this story with a pure heart. Humble us and keep our hearts in tune with God’s love. Amen.

Nicodemus is a good name. It is a name of power; a name of privilege; a name that exudes strength, authority and fame. Nicodemus literally means “*conqueror of the people*” or “*the people’s victory*”. No wonder he rose to the ranks of Sanhedrin, a tribunal assembly of rabbis in Jesus’ time. The cream of the crop! Nicodemus represents all of us in many ways. He was a leader, a rich guy, top of the religious class, well educated, powerful and privileged. He was an interpreter and judicator of the Torah and the Jewish tradition.

Life is good for Nicodemus. But he has a weakness that John the gospel writer claimed. This conqueror of people was not that confident as to going public with his interest in Jesus. He was kind of torn between two worlds. He witnessed that Jesus was all about God's love. But for him, Jesus was just too risky and he threatened the teachings and doctrines of the Jewish religion. Nicodemus had to meet Jesus at night for his questions to be answered. A theologian calls him the “original night stalker”. Some claimed that Nicodemus was scared and didn’t want to be seen or caught. Others have said Nicodemus wasn’t a true believer and that his faith was shallow and superficial. A few have even said it was just a matter of scheduling and night was the only time Nicodemus and Jesus could get together. Maybe, maybe not. I think there is much more to it than that.

Nicodemus met Jesus in the evening, in the dark, when no eyes can see nor ears can hear, so he could keep his faith secret - separated from the rest of his public life. This is John giving us a clue, because John proclaims Jesus as the light of the world. John borrows a lot from Isaiah, contrasting darkness with light. People walk in darkness, metaphorically speaking, when tragedy, violence, injustice, guilt, and pain overwhelm them. Other times, lost and bewildered. John’s concept of Jesus as light breaks through the darkness and illuminates people with love, grace, and truth. Darkness comes in many forms and is not always an easy visitor. But light and darkness need each other, like faith and doubt, to be whole, and to bring balance into one’s life’s journey.

Nicodemus met Jesus at night not for a casual encounter but for an in-depth, heart-to-heart dialogue. Nicodemus came from a place of assumptions and his proud knowledge of what he thought he knew was the truth. He approached Jesus with these words: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.” Jesus responds rather amusingly, perhaps even with sarcasm, without being distracted by his praise or his compliments. “You must be born again!” Nicodemus was surprised at Jesus’ recommendation. Nicodemus needed a life makeover - to undergo a “rebirthing process”. Despite his respectable standing, his religious commitment, his wealth and success, Jesus was basically saying that Nicodemus has a serious problem that needs urgent and immediate attention. Nicodemus is spiritually dead and he needs God’s grace to fill his emptiness.

Nicodemus is our man. He asked questions on our behalf. He was not afraid to open up his confusion. “How can an adult like me be born again? I can’t go back into my mother’s womb the second time!” For some of us, we might say: “I am not going back from the beginning, I’ve been there, done that, been part of this faith for so many years and it appears to fit well! How can being born again even be possible? As a conqueror of people, this was a big blow for Nicodemus. He did not understand what Jesus meant. Nicodemus knew he could function well in the Kingdom of the Pharisees and the Roman Empire and among the Jerusalem Political Party, but God’s reign needed another kind of life re-orientation. To even experience God’s reign, Nicodemus has to start all over again from the beginning. The very beginning, because Jesus knows, one can drink in prejudice and twisted theology and uninformed biases with an old milk! Jesus’ response is direct to the point: “I’m introducing you to something that transcends your curiosity. You’ve come asking for a sign to help you control your life or to validate what you already know. I want to put you in touch with a whole new world. I want to turn your world upside down to where you will see reality as it really is. It is a world totally out of your control. You’ve got to be born again if you are to enter that new world.” Jesus here offers a whole new possibility. It requires a radical reorientation of life.

Being born again! It is indeed ironic that an entire movement in Christianity has been built around Nicodemus’s defensive mis-hearing of Jesus in this passage. I am somewhat perplexed by some Christians who have made these words into a ritual of “receive Jesus Christ as your personal Lord

and Saviour and you will be saved.” I’m sure we have different ways of interpreting being born again. For me, it really does not require a change of name and identity. Jesus was offering a new kind of transformation. Nicodemus was born into the traditions of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. He was born into the concerns for holiness and ritual purity of their interpretation of their religious tradition. Being born again is not about converting from one religion to another. Jesus did not tell Nicodemus to be converted to Jesus’ way. Instead, Jesus asked Nicodemus to check his heart. Is it God and what God stands for who’s in there – is it true love, compassion or justice consuming Nicodemus or is it his religious upbringing, political and social biases and affiliations that make Nicodemus as a person?

Here is my personal take on being born again and I’m sure you have your own definition as well. Being born again is a breaking free of twisted beliefs to transformative grounding. It is breaking free from a restricted, prejudiced, judgmental life into a life-giving, welcoming, abundant life. Being born again is a spiritual new birth. It involves leaving behind a shady past and breaking into a transformed way of life. A spiritual new birth, while set in motion by God's grace, takes labour on our parts. Peter Woods declares that “being born again is a daily process, slow but sure, like a seed growing in the depths of one’s being, but by God’s grace, it will also bear fruit in others.”

What is your Nicodemus story? Are you seeking answers to your questions? Do you feel you need to meet Jesus in the darkness of your life to be open and vulnerable? I’m sure most of us have been there facing a Nicodemus moment. Perhaps a job no longer makes sense, or you are moving into the difficult night of a divorce or living with a terminal illness or grieving the loss of someone you love. Perhaps you are feeling restless or uncertain; spiritually, your life path feels confusing, unclear, sometimes encased in fog. Perhaps you are experiencing a siege of negativity which brings with it, frustration, irritation and anxiety. Or perhaps everything is great but you are wondering what life is all about. These are Nicodemus moments; times when we might like a good late-night conversation or two, times when we would be glad for an easy fix or answer.

To be born again is a time to examine old questions in new ways, a time to recover what is most important about life. It’s a time to trust, and even surrender, to the transformation in you

through God's grace and leading. To be born again is to recognize and hold on to those powerful, difficult, beautiful, terrible moments of human existence, realizing that intellectual solutions and concrete answers aren't what is called for here. But through listening, connecting, trusting, praying, doing and letting God's grace fill you until you are fully transformed into love.

Nicodemus did not get it or, if he did, he had such a hard time understanding that God did not want a detailed inventory of every dent, scrape, and scratch on the hearts and lives of the faithful. John didn't tell us point blank whether Nicodemus followed Jesus after that night's encounter. But Nicodemus shows up again in John chapter 19, after the crucifixion of Jesus, and appears with Joseph of Arimathea, who requests the body of Jesus for its burial. Nicodemus brought 100 myrrh and aloes to embalm the body of Jesus and laid the body to rest in a garden tomb.

As we gather today for yet another Annual General Meeting, remember that being born again means that God is continuously reshaping, forming, and molding us as individuals and as a faith community in the way of Jesus. Let us break free of the old ways that stunt our growth and enter into a new and abundant life God has in store for all of us. Amen.

Sources:

- 1- Peter Woods, "Rebirthing the Powerless Rabbi", thelisteninghermit.com.
2. Josh Blakely, "Not What We Know but What We've Been Given", <https://joshblakesley.me>
3. <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2014/03/17/daytime-lives-and-nighttime-lives-a-sermon-on-john-31-17/>