

Nicodemus – the Secret Friend

We may like the idea of a secret friend: someone who admires us or appreciates what we stand for; someone who does not stand out in our immediate circle, but nevertheless respects us from afar. Jesus was exceptional, in that he did not have pride. His mission was that people should love and respect his Father, the Lord God Himself. But he certainly had admirers, both public and private.

Nicodemus was a secret admirer of Jesus, which on the surface was most unlikely, as he was a Pharisee. This group constantly and often viciously opposed the Lord Jesus. They stood for the 'old order', for the way things were from before the Romans took control of the land of Israel, long before the birth of Jesus.

John chapter three also tells us that Nicodemus was a 'ruler of the Jews', which means that he was a member of the ruling council of the Jews, the Sanhedrin, formed more than 80 years before these events took place.

Questions at Night

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, presumably so that none of his fellow-councillors would recognise him, as this would compromise his position on the council. Eventually, any Jew would be excommunicated from their synagogues for professing to believe in Jesus, so Nicodemus needed to be unrecognised, at least for the moment.

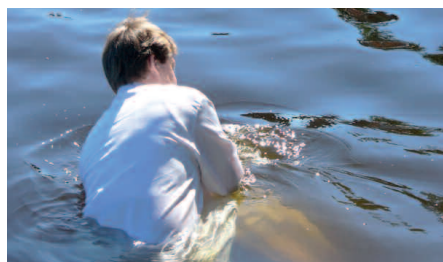
Nicodemus explained to Jesus that many of the council recognised him as a teacher sent from God. Indeed, he



addressed him as 'rabbi', that is, a recognised teacher of the written and spoken laws of Judaism. Nicodemus had an unrecorded question for Jesus, which he answered:

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

What did Jesus mean? Nicodemus did not understand, and Jesus went on to explain that he meant being "born of water and the Spirit" (v5); he was talking about Christian baptism.



This means being baptised, completely submerged in water, having confessed that we believe that Jesus is Lord, that he is the Son of God, and that we want to be part of God's extended family. In doing so, we state

that we want to live spiritual lives which worship God as our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour, and try to avoid sin. This naturally leads us to look forward to the return of Jesus to the earth, to set up the kingdom of God here.

A Heavenly Message

Jesus continued, explaining that whilst nobody has ascended into heaven, he came to explain heavenly things to us, including the love of God.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life (v16).

And that is just what Jesus offers us: everlasting life in the Kingdom of God, with no fear, injustice, illness, or disease. Then even death will be abolished for ever.

We saw that the offer is qualified – it is open to anyone who believes in Jesus (and what he stands for). This means that we need to recognise the concept which naturally follows: at some time, our lives will be inspected and assessed by Jesus himself. His next words explained that there is a clear difference made between those who accept him, and act accordingly, and those who do not:

This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God (v19–21).

This sounds a little frightening, but it need not be. If we have been baptised into the name of Jesus, and really try to live lives that please him, we can welcome our meeting with him when he returns. How?

Earlier in their conversation, Jesus said that he must be “*lifted up*” (v14). This was a reference to his crucifixion. This sacrifice is how we are to be forgiven for all our failings, and to be accepted by God – even though we get things wrong all too often. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection, God will treat us as ‘righteous’, or good enough to be in His Kingdom, when Jesus returns to the earth. What a fantastic promise!



Public Belief

Nicodemus never forgot Jesus, but it was only after the crucifixion that it became apparent how much Jesus meant to him. While the lifeless body of Jesus hung on the cross, Nicodemus again demonstrated his admiration, belief and love for Jesus.

Joseph of Arimathea was another secret admirer of Jesus, and he went to Pilate to ask for his body. It was the tradition that when someone had been crucified, the eldest male relative had the responsibility of disposing of the body. Whether Joseph of Arimathea

was related to Jesus is a matter of legend, but he certainly took on this awful responsibility.

John tells us that Nicodemus met up with Joseph of Arimathea, bringing spices with which to bury Jesus' body. The mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight, (maybe 75lbs or 34kg in modern measures) would be worth a small fortune. More importantly, the effects of this mixture teach us an amazing truth about the Lord Jesus, as we will see.

Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury (John 19:40).

Three days later, the disciples Peter and John ran to the tomb. They had been told that Jesus was no longer there but had risen from the dead.

John got there first, and records what happened:

And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying there; yet he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the handkerchief that had been around his head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed (John 20:6-8).

Public Evidence

Why did John believe in Jesus' resurrection?

Those spices, mixed in with the bandage-like funeral wrapping, would harden over the next couple of days and form a rock-like brittle casing for

the body. This was a little like the chrysalis of a caterpillar that is to change into a butterfly.

When the body of the Lord Jesus left the grave clothes, then the shape of the body would remain. This would not be a confused bundle of clothing, but a very precisely shaped mould, which had once encased the mortal body of the Lord Jesus. Now the casing was completely unnecessary, because he was risen!

There was the evidence of where Jesus had been, wrapped in grave-clothes. There was also a sign that he was no longer bound by death. John wrote at the end of this chapter:

These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name (v31).

The disciples would see the risen Jesus a number of times before he ascended to heaven, 40 days later. We see his love for Thomas, who struggled at first to believe in the resurrection.

Reach your finger here, and look at my hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into my side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing (v27).

We can have this same confidence, we can be friends of Jesus. Then we also can look forward to the return of Jesus with joy.

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are my friends if you do whatever I command you (John 15:13-14).

Peter Hale