

“Close Encounters on the Way to the Cross: Nicodemus”

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Text: John 3:1-21

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We are now in the season of Lent. It is a pilgrimage time as we begin our journey towards the cross and the empty tomb. In the Gospels, Jesus met many people on his journey to the cross, and the tales of those close encounters speak to realities of the life of faith, then and now. So it is with Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He was an expert in how to live in honour of God. He would also be well versed in the Messianic hopes of the Jews. He was respected enough to be a member of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem: the religious ruling council. He had heard Jesus speak and seen miracles. So under the cover of night he sought Jesus out to profess: “we know that you are a teacher who has come from God”. But that was as far as Nicodemus’ convictions went. As his story unfolds we see a man dealing with uncertainty. Uncertainty about who Jesus is. Uncertainty about how Jesus should change his life. Have any of you dealt with uncertainties in your faith? Certainly I have. For us who have, Nicodemus is our patron saint.

We miss something crucial here if we overthink this discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus, for encapsulated in this teaching of Jesus is the full scope of the Gospel. This becomes more clear if you read this teaching backwards. Jesus said that the only one who knows fully the will of God is God’s Son. The Son was sent from heaven to be with us, not to condemn, but to save, because God loves us. Jesus said the Son of God must be lifted up for the sake of salvation – a reference to the cross. And God’s gracious gift is this: that those who believe in him will be part of the Kingdom of God and have eternal life. And Jesus said, it happens this way: you must be born of water and the Spirit. Jesus explained this conversion by way of analogy: it is like being born. Just as our life depends on having physical parents, this new life comes from a divine parent: God. God’s Holy Spirit, working in our lives, draws us to God. In fact Jesus says, you really cannot appreciate the Kingdom of God without the Spirit’s intervention. Water = baptism: that personal act of profession of faith where we say “yes” in response to the grace we have received through the Spirit. When we think of chapter three of John we recall that one famous verse, but in this one passage we hear Jesus convey a complete presentation of the Gospel.

Nicodemus came to Jesus that night because what he had seen and heard from Jesus intrigued him. As a Pharisee he would have great certainty about God. He was learned, faithful, esteemed by his peers, expecting the coming of the Messiah. But who did Nicodemus think Jesus was when he first approached Jesus? A human teacher inspired by God. But now, in this conversation, Jesus was implying he was so much more... perhaps the expected Messiah himself! For Nicodemus, Jews were born into their faith, and lived in faith all their lives. But now, in this conversation, Jesus was saying that true faith needed new beliefs leading to conversion. As he listened to Jesus talk that night, Nicodemus’ response was

“how can these things be?” What Jesus was talking about was foreign to Nicodemus, difficult, not easy to accept, would require a leap of faith. He was uncertain. We don’t hear him affirming or denying what Jesus was saying. He doesn’t say, like others in the Gospels, “yes, I believe”, or “no, that can’t be”. We only hear his questions. There is no resolution in this story. It seems, from what we are given here, that Nicodemus walked away from this conversation uncertain about what to believe about Jesus.

We see this same caution again in chapter 7 of John’s Gospel. The Jewish leadership wanted to arrest Jesus. Nicodemus, on the other hand, wanted to defend Jesus. But rather than publicly declare that Jesus could be (or even was) the Messiah, Nicodemus played it very carefully. He played the role of the detached, wise religious leader, saying only, “But does not our Law say we should give someone a fair hearing before judging them?” In a politically charged situation, with the crowds in an uproar over Jesus, Nicodemus didn’t want to be seen on Jesus side. But even that comment as cautious as it was raised the suspicions of his fellow leaders, and they asked “are you one of his followers?” Nicodemus said nothing.

For Nicodemus and us, it comes down to the same question: what do we believe about Jesus? We easily talk about belief and unbelief, faith and doubt – as opposites. But it is not just about the opposites. I think a lot of us can find ourselves so often somewhere between the opposites...somewhere between conviction and denial. There is quite a big middle ground which is uncertainty. Nicodemus believed Jesus was, for sure, a human inspired and empowered by God. Nicodemus wanted to act in support of Jesus. But in his uncertainty he didn’t seem to be able to believe fully that Jesus was the Messiah. He didn’t want to act with certainty in defence of Jesus, because of his uncertain beliefs. This is human reality for so many people of faith, in their own unique questions and uncertainties. It is why I think the most honest confession in the Gospel came from a father who wanted Jesus to heal his sick son, “I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). I think most of us, if we are honest, would make the very same profession, and have the very same plea.

Recent studies seem to bear this truth out. British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli famously said that “there are lies, damn lies and statistics”, but statistics can provide helpful insights. The Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby for 35 years now he has been Canada’s foremost researcher and commentator on the state of religion in Canada. His last book talks about the reality of uncertainty among people of faith in Canada today. Bibby’s studies show that the % of Canadians who believe with certainty that God exists has been declining steadily over the past 30 years. Consequently it is not a surprise that Bibby also shows that church attendance is in a parallel decline, that church attendance by youth is in serious decline, and atheism is growing dramatically among youth.

Why is uncertainty about God growing? There are several reasons. But for me one of the most compelling reasons comes from the Scottish historian Callum Brown. His argument is pretty straightforward: we have simply stopped to talk about the Christian faith among our friends, within our

families, within our society. The Christian faith used to be much more public. But today there are fewer natural places where the issues and questions and uncertainties of faith can be raised, heard about, discussed, addressed. On top of that, faith has become more private over the last decades. We can feel embarrassed to talk about our uncertainties in our beliefs. We can worry, “what will they think?” Christians are becoming less inclined to talk to others about their faith issues, and we find we have fewer venues to talk about our faith issues. So our uncertainties can go on, privately and unaddressed, in time becoming chronic, perhaps move towards doubt, and perhaps even further towards disbelief. It’s like having an open wound. If we address it and treat it, there is a very good chance it will heal. If we don’t we run the risk of the wound festering and getting worse. Nicodemus saw in Jesus some things that intrigued him. He had questions about Jesus. And what did he do? He went to Jesus to talk about his questions. The solution is the same for our own age: if we have uncertainties, talk to others, seek out answers.

One of the most honest autobiographies I’ve ever read was from the prominent theologian Thomas Oden. He grew up in the Methodist Church, was ordained as a minister, obtained a Ph.D. in theology and taught in a prominent Methodist Seminary where he helped train future clergy. But for many years he was skeptical about many points of Christian belief. He doubted that Jesus was the Son of God. He didn’t believe in the resurrection. The idea of the Trinity he was unsure about. He believed God existed, but God wasn’t engaged in the here and now activity of the world. Day after day he went to work to teach people to think about God and talk about God, but for himself he not able to talk about his own questions, issues, uncertainties. That is, until one day when one of his colleagues – a Jewish professor no less – put him on the spot. His friend told him that Christians down through the ages have had all the same uncertainties. Turn to them, and learn from them how they dealt with those uncertainties. Oden wrote that this was the beginning of a real turnaround moment in his life and faith. He wrote, “Every question I thought was new and unprecedented I found had already been much investigated, and had in fact a profound body of understanding.” He also started to talk with the people of faith he knew, to see how they saw those things he was uncertain about. He also renewed his prayer life, reflecting on his issues before God. In other words, he talked with God. He wrote, “God’s grace and providence were nudging my life towards far more surprising outcomes than I would ever have imagined”. He began to see the change in his own life, and the deepening of his own faith, through the lens of Jesus’ teaching that we find in Matthew 17:20, where we hear Jesus say: “even faith that is the size of a mustard seed can move mountains”. He started to experience that change that Jesus talked about in our reading today. Uncertainty need not lead to crippled or lost faith. It is a wound that needs to be tended to.

The answer to how we do that is actually pretty basic to our faith. It’s an enduring answer that has come down to us from the very first days of Christianity. Acknowledge to yourself your uncertainty. Reflect on why that uncertainty is there. Consider what would address that uncertainty. Take the risk to talk to a person of faith you trust and respect. Ask me. But along with that, make God a partner in your journey of discovery. Pray about it. Trust that there is a resolution. And trust in God even if your questions don’t

have satisfying answers. As Paul wrote to his apprentice Timothy, “Without a doubt, the mystery of our religion is great” (1 Timothy 3:16). Jesus, that night talking to Nicodemus, said I testify to what I know because I have descended from heaven. What I say is true. I ask only that you believe. But belief, sometimes, takes some work.

Did Nicodemus work at his uncertainty? After Jesus’ crucifixion his followers fled. It was too dangerous to be associated with him. One man didn’t. Joseph of Arimathia went to Pilate to get permission to bury Jesus’ body. And he was not alone. Nicodemus came forward too, to help with the burial. Out of his own pocket Nicodemus purchased the 50 Kg of spices called for by their traditions to prepare Jesus’ body for burial. What a risk to take, because in that act Nicodemus was putting his own life on the line. He must have become pretty sure of why he was doing it.