

Encounter with Jesus – Nicodemus

In this series of services we are going to look at people who have had an encounter with Jesus, in the Old Testament, the New Testament, in history or the present day, and the effect the encounter had on them. We are starting tonight by looking at Nicodemus, and Hilary is going to read us the story.

[Readings]

Who was Nicodemus?

The first passage tells us he was a Pharisee, the same as Saul who became Paul. The Pharisees were a legalistic and exclusive group within Jewish society who strictly, but often hypocritically, kept the Law of Moses and the unwritten “tradition of the elders” – meticulous rules and regulations governing all aspects of everyday life – based on their interpretation of the Law. These were passed down orally from generation to generation, which allowed for some adjustment or new traditions to be introduced by influential Rabbis. By Jesus time there were over 700 of these “traditions”. Together with the Sadducees (another elite group in society but with different spiritual values) representatives of the Pharisees formed the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body under the Romans and Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin. He was therefore the equivalent of a Cabinet Minister, a very important and influential man, and would have been highly respected and honoured with Jewish society, although he might also have been feared and disliked by the common people. He was therefore completely opposite to the apostles Jesus had called to follow him, men of lowly standing or even outcasts such as tax collectors, and part of the establishment which Jesus often criticised and was coming into conflict with.

How did he encounter Jesus?

Nicodemus would almost certainly have seen Jesus around Jerusalem and in the Temple, but the first passage tells us he “came to Jesus at night”. In other words in secret because he didn’t want to be seen associating with Jesus – he was afraid of the Sanhedrin because they were already plotting to get rid of Jesus because he didn’t follow their “traditions” and was getting a large amount of popular support, undermining their authority. This passage comes straight after John’s description of Jesus clearing the Temple of money changers and those selling doves – normal Roman or Jewish money was not accepted in the Temple area to buy “clean” animals for sacrifice as the Priests and Pharisees regarded it as “unclean”, but basically it was a scam to extort money from the pilgrims who came to sacrifice at the Temple of which the Priests, if not the Sanhedrin, got a cut. They were of course prepared to accept any currency in gift offerings to the Temple. Nicodemus did not have the courage to openly approach Jesus to ask him questions, but he did come to meet him privately.

What happened during the encounter?

Nicodemus starts the conversation by acknowledging Jesus must be a teacher who had come from God because otherwise he couldn’t have performed the miraculous signs he was doing. This puts Jesus as his equal – a teacher in Israel – which was a complement. You sense a “but” or a question coming to follow on this complement, but Jesus takes control of the discussion and makes a statement that no-one can see (understand) the Kingdom of God unless he is born again. This throws Nicodemus right off track because he can only get the idea of a physical re-birth when Jesus is talking about a spiritual re-birth. The references to water and spirit should have been recognised by Nicodemus as they were essentially what was required for a Gentile to convert to Judaism (c.f. John the Baptist offering a baptism of repentance) – the water of baptism representing dying to their old self and becoming a new

person, as in Christian baptism. The concept of re-birth was also recognised in Roman society when a child was adopted they became part of their new family and lost all legal rights to their old identity and family. It never occurred to Nicodemus that someone born a Jew would need to convert to the true faith of Israel – which was why the Pharisees had such a problem with John the Baptist. Jesus challenges him directly on this – he is meant to be a teacher in Israel but doesn't understand the fundamental principles of God's Kingdom. Jesus goes on to expand on this and state his credentials and what must happen to him for the sake of all people- V16-18 **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."** Our acceptance or rejection of Jesus as the Son of God is the key to eternal life.

What effect did the encounter have on Nicodemus?

The first passage doesn't tell us how Nicodemus reacted or what action he took immediately, but the other two times he is mentioned in John's gospel give us an indication. Jesus' teaching in the temple had finally caused the Chief Priests and the Pharisees (the Sanhedrin) to send the Temple Guards (their police force / army) to arrest Jesus. However the guards had heard and seen what Jesus was doing, speakers in the Temple area were the equivalent to public entertainment and they would have heard many speakers, including some of those in the Sanhedrin. They had not arrested Jesus and returned to the Sanhedrin and said "no-one ever spoke the way this man does." The Pharisees immediately accuse them of being deceived by Jesus (without asking what he said) and stating that none of the Rulers of Pharisees believed in Jesus – but Nicodemus stands up and challenges that by asking if the Law condemns a man without hearing him first. He is immediately accused of being a follower of Jesus – possibly he was by that stage – but he is now prepared to be open about his involvement and risk the consequences. This is further demonstrated in the third passage where Nicodemus accompanies Joseph of Arimathea, noted by John as being a disciple of Jesus but in secret because he feared the Jews, to take Jesus' body away and bury it. The Romans normally left bodies to rot on the cross as examples to others, or threw the bodies into a common grave or on the city rubbish heap. However exceptions were made if someone influential asked for the body. Burying a body was a crucial and pious duty in Judaism and was an important act of love towards the dead person, being unburied was too horrible even for criminals. Unlike the Romans or Greeks, who cremated dead heroes, or the Egyptians who mutilated them by embalming, the Jews wrapped them in shrouds with spices to disguise the smell of decomposition because of their belief that they would rise again. The amount of spices provided by Nicodemus, 75 pounds, is a very large amount and would have been similar to that used in royal burials, so Nicodemus is making a strong statement of his love and view of Jesus by taking part in his burial. He was also prepared to be seen as an associate of Jesus after he had been condemned and executed, while all the apostles had run away in the Garden of Gethsemane and stayed at a distance for fear of suffering the same fate as Jesus. John 20:19 tells us that when the risen Jesus first appeared to them "the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews." Nicodemus' encounter (or encounters) with Jesus had changed him from a fearful man who was afraid to be seen with Jesus in case he lost his position or status to one who was prepared to be seen by the Romans and Sanhedrin taking Jesus' body away and giving it a "royal" burial.

Discussion – Discuss in your groups for about 5 minutes what we can learn from Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus and how we can apply it in our lives. We'll then have a short feedback from each group.