

Coming out for Jesus

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 8 March, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell

Lent 2A

John 3:1-17

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Today, I'm going to preach in a style that is known as narrative. A narrative story where you need to use your imagination. I'm going to transport you back 2000 years to something that could have happened. Just use your imagination. And to get into role I'm going to take off my stole. I'll leave this here. And also my cross. And I'm going to take on the persona of a person.

Okay? That's the little prelude.

Greetings and good morning to you all in the name of Jesus Christ.

I would like to tell you something that happened to me many years ago. It is about a conversation I had that changed my life. It happened between myself and Nicodemus, the morning after his encounter with Jesus. You know, that time and during the night.

Let me introduce myself. My name is Ruben, and I was part of the Jewish religious elite many years, many decades ago. I was actually studying to be a Pharisee, and Nicodemus was my tutor. I asked him if I could come under his tutelage and he graciously accepted. He was known as a progressive at that time and had much respect from his peers because of his wisdom, knowledge and experience. That was a long time ago and things have changed since then, but let me tell you my story.

I was a young and impressionable novice rabbi under the tutelage of the Pharisee Nicodemus. The hot topic among the Pharisees at the time, was this upstart rabbi called Jesus, and from all places – from all places – Nazareth! “*What good comes out of Nazareth*”, was the saying. Well it appears that many were saying that this Jesus of Nazareth was capturing the attention of many, and among the common folk in the country, especially around Galilee. He was very popular.

Well this Jesus was connecting with the people, and more disturbingly for the religious hierarchy, giving them confidence to know that they had an uninterrupted access and communication to God. The Jewish religious hierarchy had for a long time, established some strong laws about access to God and the laws of sacrifice and access to forgiveness. There was a system that ensured correct and rigorous interpretation of the scriptures. But there was a growing resentment among the common folk, that it was more about keeping power and control by the religious elite.

For the religious elite, everything had order and everyone knew their place. Trouble was, this Jesus was unsettling the system and the common folk were not only listening to him, but also questioning the interpretation and adherence to ancient laws, God's Laws, that had been set for centuries. You know the laws of which I am talking, no less than The Ten Commandments.

But it was said that Jesus had always claimed that he came to uphold the law and not to break it, and to help people understand why the laws were there in the first place. It was about community building and respect and consideration for all others. He had this "not only, but also" approach. Not only must you not murder, but also not get angry, because anger can lead to murder. Not only not to have relations with a betrothed person, but not even to desire to have relations with that person.

Jesus constantly reminded everyone to build right relations, and that was the reason for the law. The interpretation of the law had been made simple by the establishment, by setting a whole lot of little rules that people had access to and just could follow. But Jesus was challenging the people to think about the reason behind the law.

The Pharisees did not want the people to question and understand the laws, but they wanted the people to follow them ... blindly and without question. Jesus disputed this and was telling the people to take responsibility for their belief and understanding of God, and not to assume simplistic and blind acceptance.

That's what it was. Some of the conservative Pharisees wanted the people to remain uneducated and unquestioning, whereas, Jesus encouraged a more thoughtful expression of faith and belief. It seems that it's happened right the way through the centuries.

So you will understand that this was a point of much discussion among the learned Jewish leadership, Nicodemus being one of them. I have to add that Nicodemus was one of the more progressive and flexible thinkers among the Pharisees. So when we found out that Jesus was coming to town, we thought it a great opportunity to check out what Jesus stood for and what he was saying. I was champing at the bit to be a part of the action, and I had some imaginary questions that I wanted to ask Jesus, and have an intelligent discussion with him. But Nicodemus wanted to go a step further.

He sought a private audience with Jesus. And he got it. Us novices under his tutelage, encouraged him to go. Nicodemus said that the only time that he could see Jesus was at night, and when Jesus was less in demand. That was his excuse for going at night, probably after the evening meal when things were quite quieting down just a little bit. Some have said that Nicodemus did not want to be seen in a heavy discussion with Jesus. But I will leave that to your opinion.

What happened was an enlightening time for Nicodemus. Nicodemus, went through all the necessary protocols at the beginning of the conversation of polite Jewish exchange and conversation among religious leaders; they would compliment one another and so the usual pleasantries were observed.

Well, according to Nicodemus, Jesus forwent all of that and he immediately got down to the business of strong discussion as if there was no tomorrow. No time was wasted and Nicodemus' well prepared questions seemed irrelevant.

Nicodemus confessed that the conversation instead took the direction of the need to be born from above. He also confessed to trying to be smart with his response about how a grown person cannot go back into the mother's womb and be born a second time. Jesus was never going to bite on that pithy question. Instead, his terse response to Nicodemus was that he did not get the point, and was talking about spiritual and adult re-birth, not about physical re-birth.

Then Jesus talked about the wind blowing in different directions and not knowing where it comes from or where it goes. In other words, one size does not fit all and the Spirit of God can be heard and understood in many different ways. Therefore, no one has a mortgage or control over the interpretation of the Law. It can change from time to time, from person to person. All people have to take responsibility for their own understanding and be given respect that people can think in different ways. A big lesson for learned and wise Nicodemus!

Nicodemus and Jesus talked for a long time and the conversation had an amazing effect on him. He was a changed man - from that of being the cautious progressive - to the enlightened wise person. It was as if he had seen the light while being in the dark in more ways than one.

You might be wondering how this experience of my conversation and relationship with Nicodemus may have affected me all these years later. Well, I did complete my studies to be a Pharisee under the guidance and influence of Nicodemus.

But you might be interested to know that I did hear Jesus myself in the latter times of his life, and I witnessed his time when he came to Jerusalem. I followed him literally, and came to admire him greatly. I must confess that I did have that so-called being born from above experience, and through the combined witness of sharing with Jesus' close followers, and also sharing and revealing my understandings with them, have come to experience and see and understand more that everybody has opportunity to be in relationship with God.

Sadly, Nicodemus has long gone, and I have grown older. But I have taken up his wise counsel to be open and respect the thoughts and understanding of others. I have even become one of those leaders of the Jews like Nicodemus was, so the baton continues to be passed on.

Last thing. I have to admit to being a part of both camps, having the foot in both doors - the traditional Jews and this growing band of people called the followers of the Way.

They are dedicated and brave, and many have put their lives at risk by being open about their faith in Jesus. I confess to having less courage. But I still like to stir the hornets' nest and provoking others into accepting the lifestyle and views of those who seem different to ourselves.

But then, my older age tells me that we all stand on common ground, and with feet that have trod in different places. From my limited experience of knowing Jesus, he seemed to have the knack of getting to know many different people and seeing the best in them. If there is something of Jesus' example I would like to follow, that is the one ... to see the best in everyone.

Am I a follower of Jesus? Well, I think so, in my own and unique way. But I think that is the way Jesus would have encouraged. Jesus opened the eyes of Nicodemus to see differently and has done the same for me. For you here, only you know the effect that Jesus has had - and can have on all of you.

So I leave you with the same questions that I face.

What does it feel like to admit that you do not have all the answers?

What does it feel like to step out into the dark, wondering what God might have in store for you?

My friend and teacher Nicodemus stepped out into the dark when he went to have a chat with Jesus. It was my conversation with Nicodemus the morning after that set my life of learning and taking responsibility for my faith. So yes, I have been born from above just as Jesus said to Nicodemus.

I believe, from experience, that being born from above is the difference between being a spectator to being a participant. It is the difference between theory and praxis. It is the difference between having head knowledge about God, to being in relationship with God and with the whole of God's creation.

Indeed, it is about building right relations with everyone and everything that God has created.

That, I believe is being born from above.