

Nicodemus

I liked Nicodemus. He was a true son of Israel. Unlike many of the Pharisees. There was no side to Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee true to his faith. An earnest and sincere man. He held an important position in the Council, but there was no pride and swagger with him. He was wealthy, but one of the most generous men you could ever find.

It was that which gave him the opportunity to contact Jesus. Reuben came to ask if the Master would see him. Reuben was one of many who owed much to Nicodemus. The previous year he had had a serious accident and almost broken his back when he slipped and fell at his pottery. It couldn't have happened at a worse time. His wife was sick and his only son had fallen foul of the Romans. It was Nicodemus who paid for him to get healing, and somehow used his influence to get the son out of the soldiers clutches. Reuben was glad to offer any service to repay the kindness.

Of course, Jesus was ready to talk with him. He never turned anyone away. Nicodemus sent a message to say he would come later on that night. He wanted to come under cover of darkness. It would not do for his colleagues to know he had been conferring with the Master.

Nicodemus was a good man, and I suppose it was that which attracted him to Jesus and his teaching. He was very fair too. When the religious leaders generally made things hard for Jesus, Nicodemus was ready to give him a hearing. He wanted to meet Jesus and talk personally with him, and it was Reuben, as I say, who made the arrangements. I offered to stay up to provide the customary hospitality. I admit the offer was as much out of curiosity as of kindness.

It was late when Nicodemus arrived with two servants who had led him through the maze of backstreets. The night was stifling, except for a cooler breeze now and again. The window shutters in the upper room were wide open to catch any breath of air. The clouds cast dark shadows across the neighbouring houses accentuating the little lights in yards and doorways.

After the formal greetings, Nicodemus, not wanting to spend too long, launched straightaway into a conversation with Jesus.

'Teacher,' he said. There was a courtesy in his approach which would have been missing with many other Pharisees. 'Teacher, I am sure from what I hear and see, that you really are a teacher whom God has blessed with special gifts. The wonderful miracles you work are proof that God is with you and has given you his Spirit.'

Other Pharisees were suggesting that Jesus' miracles were performed in conjunction with the devil. Nicodemus, graciously left all suggestion of argument aside. He sincerely wanted to know more of Jesus' message. So much of it was in line with how he thought about God and the Kingdom, and he said so.

Jesus heard him out. Then there was a long thoughtful silence. Nicodemus, himself a man of learning, knew the value of those silences for reflection. He waited. The clear but hidden sounds of the night were lost to them. Then Jesus spoke. 'Nicodemus,' his voice was low and clear with that peculiar authority which we had come to respect. 'The Kingdom begins IN you.' Nicodemus nodded his assent. 'But no-one can see the Kingdom unless he is first born again of the Spirit.'

Nicodemus appeared to be on new ground. 'But,' he said in an amused tone, 'Are you suggesting that a grown man can be born all over again ! That's ridiculous. You don't ask a man to begin again in his mother's womb, do you!'

'No,' replied Jesus, patiently. 'That's not what I'm suggesting. There is another sort of birth. There is the physical birth of the flesh - of God-breathed life. But there is also the moment when a man opens his life to the Spirit of God, which is like being born all over again. That is what being baptised expresses, but the water is the physical sign of spiritual birth. The kingdom cannot be in you, or you in the kingdom until you have both births. The second is to be born to eternal life for which there is not death.'

Jesus paused. For a moment or two the moon broke through the cloud and a cool breeze swept across the room. Nicodemus caught Jesus' look in the flickering lamplight enhanced by the moon. I saw him start. Often Jesus' look did that to us. It was always difficult to describe it. His eyes were far away, yet seeming to look right inside you, as though he knew your innermost thoughts.

'Feel the wind, Nicodemus,' he continued. 'Listen to it in the sycamores. It's free to blow where it wishes. You can feel it. You can hear it. But you can't say where it comes from or where it is going. That's what being born of the Spirit is like. You cannot explain it. You cannot say I will make it. But when you open yourself to the Spirit of God, you know you are starting life all over again - real life - eternal life, and the Kingdom of love is in you and you are in the Kingdom - and the Kingdom is a little nearer being real for the whole world.'

'But how?' This was new to Nicodemus and he was struggling with the concept.

It was Jesus' turn to taunt him. There was an obvious playfulness in his voice. 'What! You a great teacher in Israel!'. And you don't know all this! It's only the simple truth I'm speaking. I know about the things of heaven. But if you will not believe what I tell you about earthly things, how can I expect you to understand heavenly things?'

Nicodemus knew that the words were spoken in caring jest, but at the same time they struck chords deep inside him. This was not the deep intellectual discussion he had looked for. He was quite obviously challenged by the forceful simplicity of Jesus' words.

Jesus went on speaking, but I don't think Nicodemus heard much of it. He was deep in his own thoughts. After a little while he rose. 'I must be going.' He wrapped his cloak around him. I went to the outer stairs and shook the two servants awake. Nicodemus thanked Jesus for seeing him. His gratitude was sincere. Then he was gone.

The Master lay back, his eyes closed for sleep. I am sure he was praying for Nicodemus.