

Nicodemus – a visitor in the night

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Lent 2A . John 4 1-17, Gen 12 1-4a, Ps 121, Rm 4 1-17

We've heard stories of two people today who risk everything on the basis of an impossible challenge. There's Abram/Abraham who leaves everything, trusting God, and Nicodemus, who visits Jesus in the night. Nicodemus is our subject today.

Like everyone else in Jerusalem, Nicodemus had seen the signs Jesus performed. He may well have been right there when Jesus cleared the Temple of the money changers and the people selling birds and animals for sacrifice. Fascinated by this man, he visits Jesus. But Nicodemus isn't game to be publicly associated with Jesus. Imagine Jesus cleansing the Temple today. What he did would have been called a terrorist act these days – or the act of some fanatic from a religious fringe group. Nicodemus visits Jesus, but only secretly, at night.

Nicodemus is just like many people here – educated, committed and faithful, and with a respected position in the community. He has a reputation that he's taken decades to earn. Who here would visit a revolutionary new spiritual teacher like this in broad daylight? Would you meet with a notorious troublemaker at Cibo's for coffee after church? You might be noticed! What *would* they say?

So like we would, Nicodemus visits Jesus under cover of darkness. John's Gospel makes a lot of the symbolism of light and darkness. In the verses after today's gospel, Jesus says, *'the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.* ²⁰*For all who*

do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹*But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.*' Was Jesus is challenging Nicodemus: reminding him of the way he'd come to see him; not during the day; only by night?

Maybe he meant Nicodemus chose to come in from the darkness; into the light of Jesus. Whichever is right, Nicodemus got much more than he bargained for.

No sooner had he paid his respects to Jesus than he was utterly confounded by that saying about being born from above / born anew / born again. He took it literally. And who wouldn't if you didn't have a lifetime of Christian teaching about baptism. Jesus leads him to another understanding of being Nicodemus – about being a person who is not just born not of his mother, but also born of the Spirit. We don't get to see if Nicodemus understands this.

Whether he and Jesus meet again, we're not told. But we meet Nicodemus twice more. The first time, he risks his reputation, challenging his fellow Pharisees when they want to haul Jesus before a kangaroo court ^(ch 7). The next time, he joins Joseph of Arimathea burying Jesus's body. And by doing so abandons his ritual purity ^(ch 19) so he won't be able to participate in the Passover the next day. For a Pharisee to do that would be like one of us on Good Friday deciding not to celebrate Easter.

But by then, Nicodemus had given up as any pretence to secrecy. He'd become so deeply a follower of Jesus that even after the crucifixion – when most other disciples were running away and hiding in fear and doubt, particularly the men – Nicodemus abandoned whatever social standing he had to pay his last respects. The wind – the Spirit – had done just what Jesus said; breathed where she chose. And she chose Nicodemus. Nicodemus was born anew; born again; born from above.

But all that takes us several weeks down the road, doesn't it. What about now? As we journey down that way? Does Nicodemus's visit to Jesus in the night have something to say to us? We're like him in so many ways that I think his story must speak to us.

It's really tricky for *us* to have our faith identity and our social identity open to view at the same time. They don't necessarily match. Where do we get our identity from: our family, our faith community, our nationality, our career, things we have, things we do with friends, our language, where we live, things that we're passionate about, things we love about people and things we hope people love about us?

It can be quite a mixture, can't it. And we protect these things; we don't want them laughed at or called into question. An attack on the things that make us who we are is really threatening.

Sometimes our faith identity and personal identity can contradict each other. Look at how our national identity and the plight of fellow Australians who are Aboriginal are so deeply at odds. Our ABM studies over the years have given us the chance to hear stories from faithful Aboriginal Christians; to read the same scriptures as these sisters and brothers through their eyes. That sort of experience brings us all into the presence of Jesus *together* – whether we come by night, or if we're bold enough to come in broad daylight.

But this coming together is the point. **Jesus came for us all** – for **the whole world**. Jesus calls **all of us**. We heard him say it this morning: ¹⁶ *'God loved **the world** in this way: he gave his only Son, so that **everyone** who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* ¹⁷ *'Indeed, God did not send the Son into **the world** to condemn **the world**, but in order that **the world** might be saved through him.*

No-one is left out of God's love; God sent Jesus in order that

the world might be saved. All of us.

Was it this insight which made Nicodemus choose to risk his identity – his career, his friendships, his social standing – to rethink *his* people's whole reason for being?

This son of Abraham made the same choice as his ancient forbear. Like Abram / Abraham, Nicodemus left everything to follow God, even to unthinkable places –wherever the breath of the Spirit might lead him. God's purpose was the same: that **all families of the Earth – the whole world** – might receive God's blessing.

May we be courageous enough disciples to follow these very clear examples! It's all about God's Grace; God's Love, that everyone needs it, and we are the chosen vessels. What will we do with this treasure that has been entrusted to us? Amen