

Words for an Emerging Church

Wednesday, May 26, 2021

Nicodemus, Come Back! We Need You!

Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, "Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?" They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee."

—John 7:50-52

Nicodemus has long been among my favorite biblical saints. (John 3 and Nicodemus' dialogue with Jesus will be our Gospel lesson for this Sunday, though I will not be preaching on it.) In popular thought this curious Pharisee has not been treated well, and this is especially sad in the present day when we desperately need more people like Nicodemus.

He is best remembered for his nighttime dialogue with our Savior. John's Gospel identifies him as a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, that is, a member of the Sanhedrin, and we are told simply that *he came to Jesus by night* (3:1-2). Many preachers have been quick to accuse him of cowardice stating that he secretly met with Jesus for fear of his fellow Pharisees, but there are few grounds for such an accusation. Evenings provided the few free hours of the day when thoughtful conversations could be enjoyed. The more obvious interpretation was that Nicodemus wanted a quiet conversation with this controversial rabbi who was deeply unsettling his peers. He was seeking to better understand an apparently good rabbi who was doing a great work.

Not only was Nicodemus *not* motivated by fear, but later in John, we find him boldly speaking up for Jesus while his fellow Pharisees had already condemned him. *"Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?"* Nicodemus did not fear the scorn of his peers when he realized that the truth was at stake. He did not yet understand Jesus, but he knew that dialogue was crucial if the truth was to be discovered and justice was to be served. This is the kind of courage which is so desperately needed in our time. Sadly, the Pharisees were a group of devout Jews who sought to honor the Law of Moses and were right and good in so many ways, but they drifted into legalism and could not recognize the Messiah who did not suit their legalistic understanding. They became sanctimonious, and blind to the true working of God. But Nicodemus rose above the blindness and sanctimony. Oh, that we had more leaders in our day like Nicodemus!

This past Sunday I was taken aback by the opinion section of the Lancaster Newspaper which led off with a huge banner headline, "Three Expert Opinions" over

a set of editorials which would have done the Pharisees proud. Three area physicians were explaining why everyone must get vaccinated, and each article began with a full-frontal assault on the reader. “The vaccine is the right thing to do, *and you must do it!*” The condescension toward those who might question was thick enough to cut with a knife. Please understand that there is some real irony in my being offended by these pro-vaccination pleas, because I have always been a believer in vaccines. I have long held that the benefits far outweigh risks, and I well remember the years that our son was immuno-suppressed and could easily have been killed by one of these preventable illnesses.

These doctors are right, and everyone else is wrong, and that is that—and with such arguments they shall win no converts! If Nicodemus were here, he would have begged for a dialogue. I cannot help but believe that he would have insisted on an airing of the objections to the vaccine. What does it mean that the shot we take is introduced with repeated capitalized warnings that the vaccine is EXPERIMENTAL? What’s in it? What about claims of fetal tissue in the serum? What are the negative effects noted to date? What of the concerns mentioned by women of childbearing age? There are a lot of questions out there, and though I believe that in the end the benefits are far outweighed by the risks, these questions still deserve a hearing and a serious response.

Nicodemus was not afraid to ask questions, nor to be questioned, and in the end this all led to a saving faith. (The scripture does not tell of Nicodemus’ eventual conversion, but I am convinced that he came to a full and saving faith.) A few more similarly open-minded leaders in our day would be of tremendous benefit to our nation’s physical, emotional and spiritual health. Nicodemus is not coming back, so it looks as though we will have to carry the torch for this gracious and open-minded leader, who truly knew how to initiate helpful dialogue, and to lead. And let us pray that our nation’s leaders, in government, medicine and media, might gain some of this saint’s wisdom.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

Lord Jesus, merciful and patient, grant us grace, I beseech thee, ever to teach in a teachable spirit; learning along with those we teach, and learning from them whenever thou so pleasest. Word of God, speak to us, what thou wilt. Wisdom of God, instruct us, instruct by us, if and when thou wilt. Eternal truth, reveal thyself to us, reveal thyself by us, in whatsoever measure thou wilt; that we and they may all be taught by God.

—Christina Rossetti, 1830-94