

NICODEMUS – FIRST PERSON?

I am Nicodemus. It's strange – as I speak to you, I realize how very different it would have been just a few years ago. After my encounter with Jesus – after his death and resurrection – everything was very different.

There was another time when I might have stood before a group of followers of Jesus, but only to plead with you to return to the teachings of the Pharisees. A few years ago, after introducing myself and pausing dramatically, I would have listened for murmurs of recognition, even of awe. If I did not hear them, I would not hesitate to detail my credentials.

And not so very long ago I would have felt very uncomfortable speaking among women, fishermen and tax collectors. Yet I now count it a great honour to be with you dear sisters and brothers whose status before our Lord is far higher than mine, for I have been a poor steward of the privileges given me.

When I first met Jesus I had been aware of his teachings and miracles for some time. In fact, I came to him in the dark of night after he had stunned the crowds by driving the money changers, those well-heeled entrepreneurs, out of the temple. Jesus shocked my colleagues in the religious establishment – shocked me – by claiming to be greater than the temple.

I came at night – afraid of public association with Jesus – wanting him to myself for an uninterrupted, extended discussion. Now I see that I came out of the darkness of my life and religiosity into the Light of the World.

I had made careful study and convinced myself that the miracles I had seen and heard about were real, not the imagination of adoring followers or the deception of a clever trickster. Moses commands us to follow the teaching of a true prophet – one whose miracles are genuine and whose teaching is orthodox. Therefore I came to Jesus planning to examine him. Yet it turned out completely differently. He literally took me apart.

Out of the darkness I came – curious – and Jesus talked. I came to Jesus as a collector of truths, feeling I only needed a few more pearls to complete the string. Yet what I really needed was a radical new beginning. Naturally Jesus would not let me control the conversation. He spoke of a second birth that caught me completely off guard – a birth from above – a new birth of water and Spirit. I remember that he talked about the bronze serpent of Moses and of faith in one lifted up – one greater than Moses – one who would put an end to the sting of sin and the biting-curse of

death. With the darkness outside, I listened to Jesus talk of life and faith and life eternal.

To tell you the truth, when I wasn't listening I babbled like an idiot! The thin veneer of wisdom was stripped away and my wagging tongue was connected directly to the confusion of my heart. A conversation with Jesus is an incredible experience. Some have said that he never gave a straight answer. That's not really true. I've since discussed this matter with John and he confirms that Jesus' answers were often oblique to the question but always direct to the real point.

Curious I came by night to see Jesus – and in this Jesus I began to see that God so loved the world – I began to see the light!

At first however, I was angry and resentful, thinking that a true prophet would not treat me so harshly. But later as I pondered that evening, I remembered that the prophets often spoke and acted in such a way, Samuel, Nathan, Elijah. I had only been confused because I was on the wrong side of the barbs this time.

I had come to Jesus expecting all truth to follow logically from what I already knew. How naive I was to think I could comprehend the ways of the Eternal God. And yet so much of what Jesus taught had already been revealed in the Law and the Prophets. He spoke of believing in God as the key to spiritual life and wasn't that exactly as it had been with Abraham? And did not his good works flow from that fact?

Later, I defended Jesus to the council, some would say too timidly, and still I was ostracized because of it. No longer curious – now I was hesitant, a bit nervous and self-conscious I suppose – yet I was surprised at my own courage. I stood to defend Jesus before the council, in front of the Sanhedrin. I felt that by speaking circumspectly, some of my colleagues would be struck as I was by the powerful evidence that Jesus was a true prophet.

I, who had come to Jesus first under the cover of darkness, stood before the Jewish council in broad daylight to speak for Jesus – to act the advocate on his behalf. I first came to Jesus seeking light and then stood to defend him – the Light of the World. Those who believe in him no longer remain in the darkness. Sadly, just as Jesus had said, people love darkness more than light. I was astounded to see esteemed members of the council, completely ignore the significance of Jesus' miracles while they picked them apart for technicalities on which to accuse him.

Some of their concerns seemed legitimate, for instance, that no scripture spoke of a prophet coming from Galilee. Yet when I discovered the truth that Jesus was actually born in Bethlehem, they ignored the fact. True, there are a few Pharisees who now follow the way, but it should have been all of us; for we are the ones who know scripture most thoroughly. Yet most are totally blind to the truth.

I came again into the darkness that hovered about a cross where Jesus hung lifeless. In the gathering dusk my friend Joseph and I – Joseph of Arimathea – took the body of Jesus from the cross and buried it before nightfall: the night – squeezing the light out of the sky – the inky night crowding in on our work. Everyone else had fled – deserted him. How very dark it was!

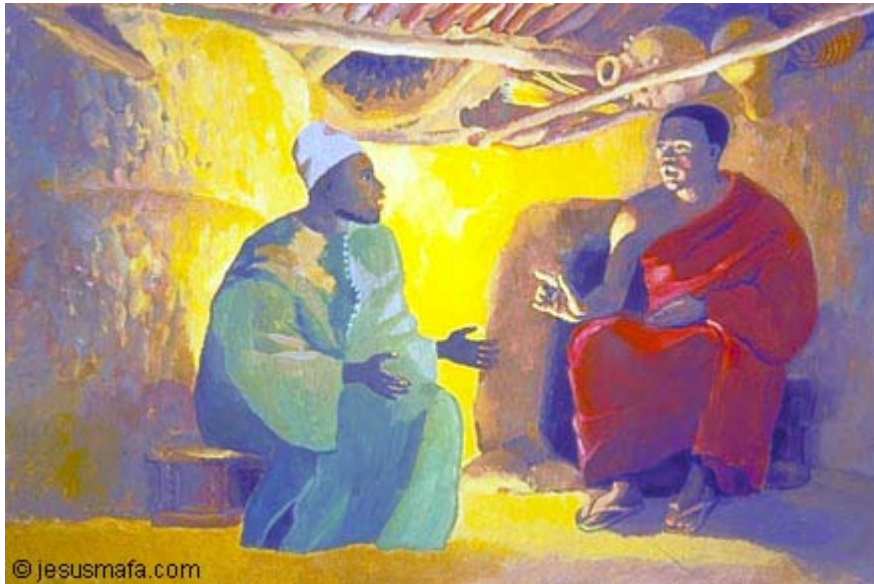
I came with myrrh and aloes for the burial of Jesus – my Lord! I came with my arms full of lavish spices – hundreds of dollars worth of spices. I was no longer hesitant – no longer filled with merely idle curiosity; we wrapped the body of Jesus lovingly – carried him gently – laid him tenderly to rest – and rolled the stone over the mouth of the tomb. We thought we had left Jesus to the darkness of death.

Once again how wrong I was!

I came out of the darkness to find the light and Jesus went back into that darkness for my sake – for the sake of each one of us. I see now that he went to the cross for us – was lifted up for us – went to be accursed in our place so that we need not be condemned. I saw the Light of the World burst forth – shining in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it.

But I have said enough – just one last thought: what a distance Jesus has brought me, from ruler to fugitive to hope-filled believer. I pray that he will also allow me to be a servant as he was a servant. And I will pray the same thing for you.

Amen.



This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. Adapted from a monologue by Ross Olson. The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh, 2009