

015 Nicodemus came to Jesus by night

There are literally 100's of different kinds of phobias (see www.phobialist.com!) Odontophobia is fear of the dentist, which we may be able to identify with. Homilophobia is the fear of sermons! The point is that if we are human we all feel the emotion of fear. Fear can be good, if it warns us of danger or motivates us to do better. But usually fear is a negative emotion (2Timothy 1:7).

We have good reason to believe that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to avoid being seen associating with Jesus, afraid of what others may think. As a ruler of the Jews, Nicodemus was probably a member of the Great Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court and legislative body in ancient Israel, who were granted a degree of authority under Roman occupation. It was made up of 71 men, mostly Sadducees, and some Pharisees. This strict religio-social system governed ancient Israel, and the rulers kept a tight rein on their power.

The Pharisees come in for a bad press in the New Testament because of their excessive purity rules and hypocrisy. But theologically they were closer to Jesus than the Sadducees. They believed in the resurrection and afterlife, the Divine inspiration of Scripture, the coming of the Messiah and miracles: the Sadducees did not. It was much more the Sadducees like Annas and Caiaphas (John 18:13,24) who masterminded the death of Jesus. Some of the Pharisees like Nicodemus were sympathetic to Jesus. After the resurrection many Pharisees came to faith in Jesus (e.g. Acts 15:5). Interestingly there is no record in the New Testament of a Sadducees coming to faith in Jesus. Nicodemus was interested in finding out more, just as there are many today who are interested. But it is not easy ... what will my family and friends think?

Nicodemus was *the teacher in Israel* (John 3:10). It seems he was one if not the leading theologian within the Pharisaic movement. Nicodemus was a highly respected leader, wealthy, and from a distinguished family. Records from outside the Bible¹ tell us that Nicodemus was one of the four richest men in Jerusalem, and a disciple of Jesus (The Talmud), and he was from an aristocratic family with royal connections (Hoskyns). You would notice when Nicodemus was in the room. Yet, despite his distinguished credentials, he was human, and fearful, and came to Jesus by night. In fact, we could say that Nicodemus was in the dark before he met Jesus.

Nicodemus stood in an uneasy place. He was part of the ruling body who were quickly coming to the conclusion that Jesus was a deceiver. In John 7 the Pharisees sent some officers to arrest Jesus. But the officers were so amazed by the way Jesus spoke they couldn't arrest him. The Pharisees said to the officers, *Have you also been deceived?* (John 7:47). Then Nicodemus spoke up in Jesus' favour (John 7:50-51). Nicodemus' loyalties were torn. He was *one of them*, but he wanted to do the right thing. He summoned up the courage to speak out and was immediately slapped down by the Pharisees, whose chosen weapon of control was fear. It was not easy, but it was a step in the right direction, because the gospel is about who we give our primary loyalty to.

This theme of the *fear of the Jews* is a theme in John's gospel which begins with Nicodemus and is developed throughout the gospel. There is nothing new about religion and fear being used as a means of control ... although it isn't confined to religious authorities! (John 7:12-13). The gospel sets us free from fear. Nevertheless fear we experience is real, and transferring our loyalty to Jesus can involve a real cost. The parents of the man born blind who was healed in John 9 refused to say what

¹ see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicodemus_ben_Gurion

had happened because, *they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue* (John 9:22). And three chapters later we read, *Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, [maybe Nicodemus?] but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue.* (John 12:42). Fear stops us confessing Him; committing to Christ; being baptised; taking that step of faith to fulfil God's call in our lives (but see 2Timothy 1:7!)

There are enough verses in the Bible that say DO NOT FEAR to have a different one for each day of the year! Yet we still get afraid. Fear paralyses us and the devil is happy to feed our fears to stop us doing God's will. Sometimes we need to face our fears and resist. Sometimes we have to break through the fear barrier. But how can we break through the fear barrier? After Jesus died His disciples were so afraid that they hid away: *On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews* (John 20:19a). I'm sure we would have reacted in the same way. But something changed it all: *Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."* (John 20:19b). The resurrection of Jesus changes everything.

I believe we have a similar kind of authoritarian fear in this country, being used in an attempt to manipulate and control the people. It's called the *fear of being politically incorrect*, and it is being used to shut down reasonable debate. It has the gospel in its sight, but we must not let this spirit of fear shut down the gospel message, because it is the gospel that sets us free.

In John's gospel we see that Nicodemus was on a trajectory, from fear and coming to Jesus by night, to a more open commitment to Jesus. Nicodemus makes an appearance at the end of the gospel, where he assists at the burial of Jesus, with his friend Joseph of Arimathea, *After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So, he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.* (John 19:38-39).

There is such a thing as a secret believer, and in a few countries of the world there is no other option. But Nicodemus was on a journey. In chapter 3 he shows interest, and comes to Jesus by night. He is not yet a believer, but he begins to move in that direction. In chapter 7 he takes a stand, and suffers for it. By chapter 19 we get the feeling that the *fear of the Jews* was weakening considerably. It could even be that the burial of Jesus was for Nicodemus a step of commitment to Christ and a breaking of the loyalties of his former life. Nicodemus had witnessed the amazing life and ministry and miracles of Christ. He had also witnessed the deceit, the lies and the evil of the Jews (NB not the Jews in general, but the ruling Judean authorities in the 1st century.) Those who use fear as a weapon of control are to be pitied because they stand on slippery ground.

Jesus' teaching often sounds demanding and exacting and it can be difficult for us to understand. For example, He said, *Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.* (Matthew 10:34, 37-39).

This means that Jesus comes with His sword (the Word of God) to cut us free of our false loyalties. This includes putting him before close family members. This sounds harsh, but when we are free

from false loyalties we are free to love more. Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom! Let us not fear or allow fear to be the obstacle that trips us up.