

Jesus and Nicodemus

Life is frail

- *eg, tsunami!*
 - *As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. (Psalm 103:15-16)*
 - at Christmas there is often time to review the year past - whether in the few days between Christmas and New Year, or as New Year resolutions are made....
 - perhaps that was one of the reasons we found the Tsunami so devastating - and why it generated such a huge out-pouring of public generosity
 - ...because we were thinking "what if that had been me... what does my life amount to?"
- Do you ever play the game "if I had my life over again..."?
 - I suppose its something we get more prone to as we get older!
 - perhaps we are prone to "play" it when some tragedy strikes - if only I'd gone and seen them more, if only I'd gone to the doctor earlier, if only I'd taken a different train, chosen a different holiday....
- I suspect most people, when they are younger, tend to think they are going to get our act together at some point...
 - its as we get older we realise we probably won't!!
 - and then we wish for the opportunity to have a clean start!

Jesus and Nicodemus

- You meet some strange people, don't you - at least, you do if you spend much time around Jesus! We were up in Jerusalem for Passover, staying over with friends for the festival. I hadn't been up to the big city more than a couple of times before I met Jesus, but we made the journey south pretty often with him. Busy place Jerusalem, especially at Passover - absolutely heaving, stuffed full of folk! And that intense religious atmosphere, just short of hysteria half the time. The Romans, out to keep a lid on things, and the Ruling Council half trying to calm things down, half encouraging the observance of the the Law that gives rise to that very fervour... What a cauldron!
- Jesus was, as always, the centre of all the gossip and speculation, the centre of interest and attention. It was kinda fun to be close to him at the time, an insider, one who knew him, a disciple of Jesus! Folk were always wanting our opinions, just 'cos we travelled with him. And you know me, not backward about letting you know my opinion!
- Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, strange people you meet. Nicodemus. Strange bloke. Well, not really strange. More strange that I should meet him! I suppose I should really say "strange **the** people you meet!" Now, Nicodemus. I suppose it wasn't just weird me meeting him, it was weird the way we met. He really came to see Jesus, of course, but John and I were there too. Everybody always comes to see Jesus; they only ever want to speak to **me** to ask about **Jesus!**
- But most people don't come to meet Jesus under cover of darkness! After all, he's generally out and about during the day, easy enough to spot - he's the one with the crowd round him! But not Nicodemus. I guess it wouldn't be too politic for him to meet Jesus in public, seeing as he is a member of the Ruling Council - and everyone knows they're not too keen on any independent minded rabbis or rebels! He's a Pharisee too, which doesn't help - they're not far from Jesus' attention anytime criticism is being dished out!!
- So it was very peculiar the night Nicodemus came to speak to Jesus. We were up

on the roof, enjoying a bit of quiet and fresh air before the noise and bustle of the next day. I was just about to head for bed when there was a knock at the door downstairs. That in itself was strange enough, but someone went and answered it... a couple of moments later a somewhat hesitant head appeared up the stairs. You could tell it was someone important by the way he was dressed, but his face was in the shadows and I don't think I'd have known Nicodemus from Adam anyway!

- How come Jesus always, always seems to be in control and know what's going on - its like he has a direct hot-line to God or something!! He seemed unsurprised to see Nicodemus, and got him a seat, and sent me off to get something to drink for us all. Ever welcoming, whoever comes to see him! I missed the introductions - so John had to whisper in my ear who it was when I got back with the drinks - nearly dropped them on him in my surprise!! A member of the Ruling Council, here, in the same house as us!?
- Nicodemus had obviously come to ask something specific - he had that slight nervousness that you get when something's bothering you, not quite sure where to begin. "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." Well, a bit of flattery never did any harm! Mind, the words must have stuck in his throat a bit, what with all the mud the Pharisees have been flinging in Jesus' direction recently!
- Jesus seemed completely uninterested in what he'd said, flattery or no. Almost rude: "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." But we weren't talking about the kingdom of God... or were we? Jesus confuses me sometimes! From the look on Nicodemus' face it was like Jesus had lifted the lid of his heart and looked right in!! Like Nicodemus wasn't sure he, Pharisee and member of the Ruling Council though he was, would see the Kingdom of God!! If he wouldn't... who would?... If he wasn't sure... who could be? And what was all this born again stuff? Nicodemus' question was just on my lips when he asked it:
- "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" That's a pretty startling mental picture, let me tell you!
- Jesus' answer was... surprising. Start again, he said. Be born, not physically this time, but spiritually. Without it, you're lost, dead, without hope, heading for darkness. And he said this to Nicodemus! Nicodemus didn't need to start again - he was upright, moral, good, trustworthy; someone you'd trust with your wallet and your wife! He was the last person who you'd have thought needed to start again. But Jesus said, without reservation, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again!"
- Jesus was pretty scathing when Nicodemus didn't seem to get it - though I was with Nicodemus on that one!! Said he of all people should understand it, as Israel's teacher. Now being a teacher of Israel means knowing your way around the Scriptures. Was Jesus suggesting that all he was saying was in the Scriptures? Sure didn't sound like what the religious teachers talked about each week at synagogue. A new start. Nothing about obeying the rules. A new life, clean and unsullied. That sounds good! ... but, hang on, that would mean giving up being able to help ourselves, any thought of being able to please God... that's a double edged sword, that is. Sounds great, but I don't like giving up control! I don't like gifts that aren't of my choosing! I... I... that's pretty threatening stuff!
- I think that's what Nicodemus was thinking too. He went kind of silent, listening but pondering too. Jesus went on talking, said a load of stuff, some of which passed straight over my head, some of which seemed to make some sense. This new birth seems to centre round believing in God's Son, the Messiah we've all heard

about. Fair enough. But the way Jesus talks about of God's Son is kinda different to the way anyone else I've ever heard before does. Makes out he's loving and gentle, that he exposes the insides of people, their thinking and motives, as much as leading their armies.

- And I'm sure he's hinting at something. Jesus quite often uses language that seems slippery, that can be hard to pin down, almost as if he's talking about things, wanting us to understand - but not too plainly!! He almost sounds like he's hinting that he is God's Son!! "... how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven - the Son of Man." That sounds like he's the Son of Man... and that he's seen what heaven is like!? But he surely can't be claiming that!!! Oh, a prophet, sure, with power from God that I can't explain. But... the Messiah? Could it possibly be? Could all my yearning for... well, for life, proper life, a fresh start, peace inside despite the things I get wrong... could all of that be met in Jesus? He asked me to follow him, and I came. A fresh start indeed! But who am I following? And where will he take me?
- I'm not right sure - I don't think I could ever leave Jesus; he's much to good a friend for that. But, he really gets to me inside - I almost feel like he's slowly turning my life upside down, and I'm not always sure I like that. I guess Nicodemus was thinking some of the same thoughts as me, 'cos he thanked Jesus for his time, and very thoughtfully slipped back into the night from where he came. I wonder whether we'll see him again? It'd be hard for him to give up everything he has to follow Jesus, and start again. Mind, I'm not sure its really any easier for me - not when you really get down to it, Jesus asks just the same from me - everything!

Conclusion

- At one level, we are so familiar with these verses:
 - most of us could make a stab at John 3:16 from memory, many of us tell the context from which they came
 - familiarity can rob things of their surprise and power
- **UNLESS!**
- We eaily assent to the truths here, but do we daily feel their power?
 - do they simply identify the club we belong to, or do they shape our living?
 - unless is such a blunt, strong, uncompromising word!
 - without a fresh start in Christ, we are doomed to darkness
 - without a fresh start in Christ, however good, upright, moral, likeable, successful someone is, they are destined for hell, condemned for their rebellion
- Have we "closed with Christ", in the old phrase?
- And do we so speak, challenge, plead, commend, urge people towards Christ that they have every opportunity to "close" with him?