

## *Nourishment for the Journey*

### *Ruminations on John 3.1-21*

#### “Intentional Misunderstanding? The Vice of Credulity”

The story of Nicodemus is only told in John’s gospel. John’s gospel was written decades after the synoptic gospels, which means that John had that many years of perspective to assess how people were or were not receiving the ‘good news’ of Jesus – which, as we’ve mentioned a couple weeks ago, may not sound like good news in that to live by Jesus’ values and virtues is not easy.

John has almost certainly been privy to see that most of the people who reject becoming a genuine follower of Christ have done so not because of their lack of interest in what Jesus has had to say, but rather in their recognition that following in his ways will require of them more than they want to strive to become. It requires of them a greater ethic of truthfulness, critical thinking, investigative research, imaginative inquiry, tenderness and gentleness of soul, courage and kindness of character, and selflessness of spirit than they really want to dedicate themselves to following.

And this is no doubt why still today there are far more who call themselves Christians who are not actual followers of Christ. Contrary to popular belief, Jesus didn’t make things easier on his followers than those who simply followed the Jewish law, but far more difficult. In his sermon on the Mount, he lists of host of things in which he says, *“You have heard it said that..., but I tell you...”* In each of these instances, the ethic Jesus proposes is far more difficult to live by than what the law had said.

To be a disciple or follower of Jesus means you need to transform your spirit and character. It means the ethics of this world are not enough to help establish the Community of Heaven on earth. And this is precisely what Nicodemus, and the other religious authorities of Jesus’ day, did not understand about his vision and mission...about his value system, and the virtues that supported that system.

When we read the story of Jesus, from any of the four gospels, one of the things that stands out is that he wanted his disciples to think about what they believed and why. He did not give them many platitudes for them to latch onto so as to make their faith simpler and easier. No, he told parables and metaphorical stories which required them to use their God-given reason and imagination. He spoke in language that was mytho-poetic and suggestive, rather than literal and descriptive. He knew well that people who only believe what they hear are not going to be very good people, for they have not thought things out for themselves, but have accepted a mental laziness and spiritual lethargy whose goal is to make life comfortable rather than make life good.

Goodness requires more of us than simply doing the ‘right’ thing. It requires that we carefully question and investigate the truth, logic, and commensurability of our ideals as applied to our reality. Not only do our motives and actions need to be pure, but also the methods by which we determine that they are indeed pure.

To follow Jesus requires a rigorousness of spirit to consider whether something is ethical and what makes it so. To be genuinely ethical and conscientious is difficult. To always look to do the good and right thing, for the right reasons, and by the right methods rather than do the prudent or ok thing for the justifiable reasons, and by the common or socially acceptable methods, requires diligence in assessing each situation and determining how best to employ the virtues of love, justice, peace, compassion, gentleness, and other such character traits of God, Jesus, or other virtuous persons in our lives.

Nicodemus is a man who we will see is not a person who has taken this diligence of virtuosity and moral character as seriously as he should have. He is not an evil man, as we would normally think of that; but

he is a regular man. He is content with 'getting by' rather than genuinely 'being good.' Is that not where most people are?

Nicodemus seems to want to learn what Jesus has to teach. After all, he sought Jesus out and came to where he was staying. He had likely witnessed the words and actions of Jesus when he cleansed the temple in the immediate verses before this chapter. It would have been clear that Jesus was zealous in making the Temple a holy place again rather than a "marketplace" that was more concerned about profits than people. This display of showing the courage of his convictions may have been very appealing to Nicodemus. Or, it may have been antagonizing to him, as it was for some of the other religious authorities. While he may have come to Jesus by night as a symbolic representation of his true motive, he may also have come when it was dark so that he would not get in trouble with his colleagues for actually identifying with Jesus after his escapade in the Temple.

As I see it, I think he was genuinely curious about Jesus, and wanted to learn what he was really all about. When he finds Jesus, he tells him that he and others believe that he is a teacher who comes from God given the "signs" that he does.

In the two previous chapters of John's gospel, Jesus has had his baptismal experience, has been declared by John the Baptist and others as the Messiah, has shown he can read the character and spirit of people quickly as when he called his disciples, and has turned the water into wine (a reference to his giving a baptism of spirit rather than water, as John the Baptist had declared) at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. From there then went to the Temple during Passover and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and drove out those selling doves for the use of sacrifice, calling them out for making the Temple a place for profit-making rather than soul-shaping.

Interestingly, the religious authorities in the Temple asked him for a "sign" for why he was upsetting their status quo in condemning their money dealings in the Temple. They did not see his actions as a sign in itself, as apparently Nicodemus had seen. But the fact that they asked for a sign that he was from God, and Nicodemus was intrigued by Jesus because he thought his actions in the Temple were indeed a sign that he was from God, reveal that both they and Nicodemus thought it important that one who acts on behalf of God shows "signs" that they are from God.

Jesus objects to this aspect of Nicodemus' thinking, the need for a sign, by retorting, *'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'* The point is that if you yourself are of the kingdom of God, that is one who lives by God's values and virtues, which is what it means to be 'born from above,' then you will not need any additional sign than to simply recognize the behavior of one who is of God. People of like character and spirit will inevitably recognize each other, so Jesus seems to be stating.

Like many of the people, the authorities had adopted an undisciplined way for determining the truth about people – whether or not they could do miracles or other signs that only those from God could presumably do. They had grown lazy in their spirituality, and credulous in their thinking. Rather than become the people who themselves developed and nurtured the values and virtues of God in their own lives, so that they might be able to identify others of like mind, character, and spirit, they instead looked for an easier method. They sought to be shown that the other person was worthy of their attention by what the other person could perform for them. They became people who wanted to be entertained by those who were truly good, rather than people who were committed themselves to being truly good.

Nicodemus reveals his laziness of thought and credulity of spirit when he assumes the easiest interpretation of Jesus' words. He apparently doesn't want to think deeply and benevolently about Jesus' words, but assumes the easiest and worst of meanings Jesus could have possibly meant: *'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?'*, Nicodemus asks.

Really Nicodemus? You really think that is what Jesus meant?

It reminds me of how people in our own culture assume the weakest possible interpretation of each other's words – whether they be in discussion in person or on social media. Straw man arguments, ad hominem arguments, and other logical fallacies are flippantly used to caricature another's position in such a way as to make it seem absurd. And to those who see what they are doing, those people are quickly identified as people of low moral status and credulous character. They don't think about the words or arguments with critical thinking as to its possible efficacy, or with an empathetic understanding as to the best possible meaning it might have, but quickly dismiss the person's words so that they don't have to engage in any further dialogue. Again, whatever is of least effort for themselves; rather than as a means to engage in constructive and mutual dialogue in which both put forth efforts at arriving at truth, or at least some common ground.

It is insulting to Jesus the straw man Nicodemus creates, just as it is insulting when people do this to each other in our own society.

The word Jesus used can be translated into English as born "above, anew, or again." 'Born above' would clearly indicate that Jesus is talking about being born of God, that is possessing God's own Spirit. 'Born anew' would not necessitate a similar moral nature with God, but might imply that if he gave Jesus the benefit of the doubt. But 'born again,' the meaning Nicodemus attributed to Jesus, was the most bizarre of understandings he could have chosen to interpret Jesus' words. The fact that he pretended, or credulously assumed, Jesus literally meant we need to enter into our mother's womb a second time is ridiculous. It is disrespectful to assume such an asinine interpretation to another's words. And he should have known better than to do this.

Jesus is surprisingly gentle in calling him out for his disrespectfulness. Instead of directly telling him what he is doing in making fallacious assumptions, like a Greek philosopher might have done, he repeats his statement with an additional twist – using yet another word in which has multiple meanings: pneuma – which can mean breath, wind, or spirit. Jesus says one must be born of water and pneuma. Since water and wind are two of the foundational elements of the world to the ancient mind, this interpretation would seem reasonable. Water would symbolize the waters from our birth from our mothers, and wind would symbolize the power of an invisible reality that animates our lives. Breath is another contender since this would be a reference back to the creation story where there were first the primordial waters, and then the breath of God that blew across those waters. But spirit might be the best option here as it is contrasted with 'flesh' in the next sentence. We are corporeally born of flesh, but we also need to be born ethereally of spirit.

All the words might fit with a proper imagination, and the translators into English often use all three words to denote the single word pneuma from the Greek in an obvious interpretation that Jesus used the word to mean all three things in the next few verses.

Nicodemus, however, gets hung up in being a persistent literalist. He wonders how all that Jesus has said makes any sense given his rigidly narrow and credulous interpretation. Twice now Jesus has used words with multiple meanings to try to get Nicodemus to think outside the box, but he chooses to remain cloistered in his own unsympathetic analysis of Jesus' words. Consequently, Jesus becomes more direct with him in asking him how a person such as Nicodemus who is supposed to teach others about religious realities does not understand what he is trying to say. It is a sharp criticism, for the insinuation is that he is not qualified for the position in which he holds if he can't understand this rather simple use of the intellect to consider other ways of interpreting Jesus' words than the way he has chosen to do so.

Jesus makes clear that he believes that Nicodemus is not acting out of ignorance, but out of intentional misunderstanding – i.e., credulity. Jesus can't imagine that someone with Nicodemus' schooling doesn't

get his play on words, as that is part of their training. Nicodemus is being deliberately obtuse, and it likely hides a resentment, if not antipathy, towards Jesus. His earlier words that could easily be interpreted as respect for Jesus are obviously not his real intent.

Jesus now becomes like a Greek philosopher in making his criticism of Nicodemus while also making another point. He says that he and his followers speak of what they know and testify to what they have seen (the implication being that Nicodemus does not), and yet Nicodemus, who should be able to identify the truth in them, can't; or worse yet, won't. Nicodemus and the religious authorities speak deceptively; pretending to speak of truth, but actually hiding it for their own purposes. Not only do they not speak the truth, they also do not testify to the truth by their daily lives. What they value and owe their allegiance to is not the values of God, but those of privilege and of empire.

All the gospel writers contrast how Jesus' values are those of God and that he actively opposes the values of empire – revealed not only in Roman authority, but Jewish authority which chooses to be complicit with and supportive of Caesar's values rather than God's. It is a scathing rebuke when Jesus says that if Nicodemus cannot understand earthly truths, then how will he be able to understand the deeper heavenly truths that Jesus is trying to teach. Again, when he claims that Nicodemus won't 'believe' what Jesus is saying, it is not merely his pointing out a difference of opinion, but of an entirely different value system. The difference between Jesus and Nicodemus (and subsequently all the Jewish religious authorities) is not merely a matter of policy distinctions, but of fundamental ethics; not merely a religious misunderstanding, but completely divergent spiritual realities. It is the difference between night (Nicodemus comes at night) and day (Jesus went to the Temple during the day)...between falsehood and truth...between the lethargy of credulity and the earnestness of investigation.

The ethos of the religious authorities, as evidenced by their making the Temple a marketplace, is one of finding ways to prosper their own wealth and power. This is not of God, but is the way of empires. Jesus introduces an apocalyptic term, 'son of man,' to further the distinction between himself and Nicodemus. The son of man, the one whose very presence and character acts as a judge of all peoples and nations, is one whose reality is heavenly. The son of man can ascend to and descend from heaven. This is not meant to be a spatially locatable act, but a spiritually manifest one. The son of man is the standard by which all others are judged according to their values being in align with, or at odds with, God's values.

This standard-bearing son of man ultimately proves to be healing (like the staff of the serpent was in the wilderness during the time that Moses liberated the Hebrews from the Egyptians), even though it will initially be divisive.

(Jesus, the new Moses, is to liberate the Hebrews from the Romans, and will be a divisive figure whom the oppressors will hate and the oppressed will love. The Egyptians sought to kill Moses -- both at birth, and later in life; and Jesus' own story reveals this parallelism with Moses).

It will be clear whether people meet the standard of the son of man by their own behaviors, and this will separate the good from the evil. But, at least some strains of Hebrew thought attested, this would allow for those who are evil to see their sinful ways as contrasted with the son of man, and thus enable them to confess their sin and then repent of it by changing their ways to God's ways. The hoped for outcome was to be liberation for all.

John alludes to this Hebrew way of thinking in verses 16 and 17. God loves the entire world, not just Jewish people. And because of this universal love God has for all creation, God assigned Jesus, one who reflected God's own virtues and values, to show people how to live in relationship to one another. By doing as he does (i.e., believing in him and his ways), life eternal would ensue. That is, life that is imbued with the blessing of God's presence in our lives, of sacred reality permeating our reality, of divinity incarnating in humanity, and of immortality of spirit usurping the mortality of fleshly being, will become the new reality. It is how we are born from above/afew.

John, the gospel writer, uses highly mytho-poetic language to express this transformation of reality that is to occur. No longer will the ways of empire dictate the human condition. Rather, through the one who manifests God's ways, all peoples will learn how to live in right relationship to God and to each other until love, peace, and justice abide throughout the world. This is the meaning of the long-hoped-for Messianic Age, which the Messiah was to initiate.

The object of the son of man was not to condemn the world through judgement, but to save it through judgement. This, of course, would require worldwide repentance; but that was the theological aspiration of Jesus – and at least some of his followers.

The problem, however, as John foreshadows, is the Nicodemuses of the world. The ones who are curious about being good, and even want to appear as being good, but who are not actually committed to being good. The Nicodemus' of this world are too credulous to take Jesus seriously. They are spiritually lazy and morally lethargic. They want things to be easy, comfortable, effortless, and convenient. They are not interested in the depth of discernment, the challenge of character, the diligence of discipleship, or the vigorousness of virtue. They only want to 'get by.'

John, no doubt, has had decades to see how only the few are truly committed to Christ's ways, and are willing to do the difficult task of doing as Christ did. He has witnessed how most don't ever take Jesus seriously, and even those who seem initially interested in Jesus are not willing to live by his virtues and values.

Nicodemus is introduced by John to bear witness to how Jesus is generally received by the world. They may find him entertaining temporarily, edifying intellectually, and even inspiring of their hearts; but they just don't want to put forth the effort to dedicate their entire lives to making his values their own. They don't want to bear the risk of opposing the authorities of this world by speaking as a servant of God. It is too dangerous, and they have much to lose when judged by earthly standards.

And for that reason, people will choose the darkness over the light. Even when they see the beauty and goodness of the light, they will still choose darkness; for it is the easier path, the less complicated way.

The Nicodemuses of the world have become masters at self-deception. They claim to affirm God's ways while in actuality denying God's ways. Their ruse is so powerful that they end up fooling themselves. And so when someone who shines the true light crosses their paths, they may take notice, but they soon look for ways to minimize that light, discredit that light, persecute that light, and even kill that light – for that light will always reveal their own darkness, and they are afraid that they will be found out for who they are.

Credulity, like that of Nicodemus, is the way such people live. It is the intentional living in ignorance, the denial of needing to earnestly search for the truth, and the willful discrediting of facts, values, and virtues that we know to be good in order that we might live a more comfortable and oblivious existence.

Credulity is the vice in Nicodemus that Jesus condemns. Are we also willing to condemn it – in ourselves, and in others? Or are we more content in living lives in which we may be misunderstanding Jesus and the commitment he calls us to in following in his ways?

May your Lenten ruminations lead you away from credulity, and towards the ways of Jesus. May it be so.

– Rev. Bret S. Myers, 3/10/2021