

The Night of Light

It was strange that I went to see him at all. I know I didn't understand it at the time. Even today, I'm still not really sure. It was out of character, you see. At least that's what everyone said at the time—those who knew about it, anyway. And not many knew. I tried to keep it quiet. At least that was in character. You see, I was really a middle of the road sort of man. Still am, in a way—although perhaps not the same way.

But that may explain why I went to see him. It seemed that he stirred up violent reactions in people. Either they were fanatically for him or viciously against him. It all seemed irrational to me. I think I wanted to see if I could find some middle ground. I hated people being at loggerheads—particularly fighting over religion—because that's what it was.

He was a kind of wandering preacher. He had only recently started this. Before that he had been a carpenter. But he had burst on the scene, after having had something to do with the Baptizer. Now there was a real firebrand! I think he really went a bit over the top. He called us leaders “a brood of vipers”! When some of us went down to near Jericho to hear him, he said, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Hardly the way to win friends and influence

people! Now I realised that some of us were not all we should have been, but I thought John's description a bit harsh at the time. John eventually stuck his head out too far and King Herod cut it off! I suppose that's also part of the reason I went to see him that night—because I didn't want the same thing to happen to him as well.

And it looked as if he was well on the way! By the time he came up to Jerusalem for the Passover, he was already causing a stir. There was a story circulating that when the wine had run out at a wedding in Galilee, he had produced 150 gallons of the very best stuff! "So what's wrong with that?" you might be asking. Nothing, in itself. Only he produced it from water!

Well, it was obvious, this was trouble. Why? Because even if it wasn't a miracle, this was someone who could make people believe he had power—and that was dangerous. But if it was true... well, work it out for yourself.

But if that wasn't bad enough, when he came up to Jerusalem he really blotted his copy book—certainly as far as the rulers were concerned. It was the most remarkable thing. I was actually there the day it happened, looking down on the Outer Court of the Temple, when there was this tremendous commotion. This was the area that was open to all—even people of other nations and religions—and it was massive—over

a quarter of a mile long and nearly as wide. Although it was supposed to be for everyone, as I said, a large part of it was taken up with the businesses run by the Temple. You know, people had to buy the animals for sacrifice there (they couldn't bring their own—they wouldn't be passed as fit by the priests) and people from other parts had to get their money changed into the local currency to pay the temple tax. Of course all this generated a lot of wealth for those in charge of the Temple.

The first thing I saw was the cattle and sheep stampeding. He had a rope and was driving them out. People were flying in all directions. Then he started on the tables of the money-changers. He grabbed them and turned them upside down, sending the money scattering and rolling in the dirt. I must admit even I had to smile to see some of the fat money-changers grovelling in the dirt trying to recover their ill-gotten gains! He told them all to get out. He said, "How dare you turn my father's house into a market!" I wondered what he meant, because as far as I knew his family had no connection with the Temple rulers. But the really remarkable thing was this: no one stood up to him. He was only one man. But no one could withstand his wrath. They all turned tail and ran, until he was left standing alone. Well, almost alone. Wandering around

among the demolished tables was a lamb. He turned and looked long and hard at it. The lamb stopped and looked at him, and I heard him say, as if he was repeating something: “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Then he picked it up and said, “There’s no more need for you to die, my friend!” and he walked out of the Temple Courts carrying the lamb.

At that moment I knew this man had power, and that it was God’s power, but I also knew that it was highly dangerous. I’m telling you all this to try to explain why I went to see him that night.

At night? Yes, I went at night. I suppose I’d better explain why. It was because of who I am, or rather who I was. My name is Nicodemus. Strangely enough for someone so Jewish, it is a Greek name. But that shows that my family were really trying to keep in with everyone. My mother was well connected among the priestly families—the Sadducees. They were very powerful, not just because of their control over the Temple and all the finances of the Temple, but also because of their adopting Greek and Roman culture. On the other hand my father was a Pharisee and that’s what I became. We were really more hardline. Saw ourselves as the custodians of God’s law and were suspicious of any compromise. We jealously guarded

the moral law and hedged it about with all sorts of extra teaching. We thought it was the only way to please God.

Anyway I was called Nicodemus, and it means “conqueror of the people”—which I suppose my parents thought was an appropriate name for the son of a wealthy religious family, who they had no doubt was going to be a ruler. And in fact that’s what I became—eventually becoming a member of the highest religious and civil authority in the land—the Sanhedrin.

So you see, that’s why I went to see him at night. After what he had done, it wasn’t really politic for a member of the Sanhedrin to be seen consorting with the likes of him. And anyway I wanted a quiet time, because I wanted to give him some friendly advice.

Things started off well enough. He welcomed me and we sat down to talk. He looked at me expectantly, as if he already knew why I had come and what I was going to say. As it turned out, I didn’t get a chance to say much. I didn’t get past my opening remarks. All my finely prepared speech was left unsaid.

I said, “Rabbi, we know that you’re a teacher come from God, because you couldn’t do the miracles you’re doing if God wasn’t with you.” I know, it sounds incredibly pompous now, but then I thought that I was being so charitable to this young preacher, that I really

appreciated his desire for reform, that I recognised his power and that I was really on his side. I suppose I wanted him to fit into my world, not the other way round. A common mistake!

I paused for effect, but I found his intense gaze somewhat disconcerting, and I kind of lost my train of thought. That was my undoing! He took the conversation by the scruff of the neck, and he never let it go again! He said, "The truth is, you can't see God's kingdom unless you are born again!"

I was completely taken aback. As a young boy once said, this was "the wrong end of the stick we weren't talking about!" But I managed to exclaim, "How is it possible for an old man to go back into his mother's womb and be born a second time?!"

He said, "It's not your mother who needs to give birth to you again, it's the Spirit. Otherwise you can't enter God's kingdom. You have to be born again!" He must have seen my look of bewilderment, because he went on, "You shouldn't be surprised when I tell you, you must be born again." He paused and turned his head towards the window listening. He said, "Listen to the wind. The Spirit is like the wind. You hear the sound of the wind, but you can't tell where it comes from or where it goes. It blows wherever it pleases. It's like that when the Spirit gives new birth to someone."

By this stage I was so flummoxed that I could just ask, “How is this possible?!” I think I grasped some of what he was saying. When people from other nations and religions became Jews, some of our teachers talked about them being born anew. But he seemed to be implying that everyone, including me, a religious leader, had to be born again.

He smiled. “You are a teacher of Israel, and yet you don’t understand! I’ve told you things of the earth and you don’t believe me. How will you believe if I tell you things of heaven?” And then he proceeded to do just that! He said, “There’s only one who’s come from heaven—the Son of Man. Remember Moses, when the people were dying of snakebites? He made a bronze snake and lifted it up so that everyone who was sick could look at it and be cured. Well, the Son of Man must also be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God loves the world so much that he gave his only Son so that whoever trusts in him will not be lost but will live forever. It’s not to condemn the world that God sent his Son, but to save the world! If you believe in him, you are not condemned, but if you do not believe in God’s only Son, you stay condemned.”

He paused, as if he expected me to say something, or at least ask another question. But by now I was so

overwhelmed with what he was saying, I was speechless. I knew some of what he was saying was from the Scriptures, but he was holding it up in such a way that a completely different light was shed on it.

As if reading my mind, he said, “Light has come into the world, but people love darkness, not light, because their deeds are evil. Evildoers hate the light and won’t come into the light in case their deeds are exposed. But if you do what is true, you come into the light to show that what you do has been done by God.”

It was that night that the light began to dawn on my soul. I’ll not pretend that I understood it all. All I know is that I left there that night a different man from the man I was when I came. I had come full of my own certainties, my received wisdom; I left realising how little I knew and understood—I didn’t even know what questions to ask. I came to bring light; I left realising I was in the dark and needed light. I had come certain of the ladder I had to climb to God; I left wondering if there was a need for any ladder now.

I’ll not say I was “born again” that very night, but without doubt a new life was conceived in me. Although I had no more questions that night, very soon my mind was full of questions. I examined everything. Why did we believe what we did? Were we right? Above all I kept coming back to the one big question:

Who was this carpenter turned preacher they called Jesus of Nazareth? From that night I followed his career with renewed interest.

Such was the growing opposition to him that he only appeared in Jerusalem on certain occasions, usually at some of the main religious celebrations when crowds thronged the city, so it was over two years before I became involved with him again, and then only indirectly.

He was teaching openly, and he was demolishing his critics. Some had criticised him for healing a disabled man on the Sabbath day when we were supposed to rest. But he said that if they thought it all right to circumcise a child on the Sabbath, surely it was even better to cure a disabled man. They had no answer to that.

There were all sorts of wild rumours flying around in the crowds. Some were saying he was the Prophet. Some were saying he was the Messiah. But others were saying he couldn't be, because the Scriptures said the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, not Nazareth. Yet others were asking why the authorities were allowing him to preach if in fact he wasn't the Messiah?

In the end the Sanhedrin felt they had to do something. They sent temple guards to arrest him. I wasn't in favour of that, but I kept quiet. As it turned

out I needn't have worried, the guards came back empty-handed. The majority of the Council were livid. "Why didn't you bring him in?" they demanded. The guards said, "We never heard anyone speak the way this man does!" And they recounted some of his words: "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture says, streams of living water will flow from within him." "We don't know what he meant," the guards said, "But no one ever spoke like that!"

"You mean he has deceived you too!" some of the Pharisees said. "None of us or the other rulers have believed in him, have they? Only this cursed common crowd who don't know God's law!"

That's when I felt that in fairness I had to speak up. Perhaps it wasn't the most opportune time to speak. But sometimes you just have to speak, come what may. I just asked a general question. I said, "According to the law, should we condemn someone before hearing him to find out what he is doing?" I hoped they might at least be prepared to give him a fair hearing. It was a vain hope. They were already prejudiced. Some of them retorted, "Are you from Galilee too?! Look into it and you'll find that no prophet comes from Galilee!"

There was a clear hint there that they thought I was a secret disciple of Jesus, so after that I kept my

thoughts to myself. In fact they were right. I was a disciple of Jesus. But I'm ashamed to say that I was afraid to confess it openly. And I wasn't the only one—my friend Joseph of Arimathea was in the same position. As a good friend of mine has said: "We loved praise from men more than praise from God." We were afraid we would lose all our privileges. If you are ever tempted in that direction, let me tell you that was the most miserable year of my life. I knew what I should do, but I was afraid to do it.

Eventually things came to a head. It was only a matter of time. The opposition in the Sanhedrin reached fever pitch. I remember a big debate taking place about it. Someone said, "If we let him go on like this—preaching and doing miracles—there's going to be a popular rising, a rebellion, and the Romans are going to come and destroy everything and remove our power completely!"

Then the High Priest, Caiaphas, spoke. I can still hear his sneering tones. "Don't be so stupid! Why should the whole nation be destroyed? One man must die for the people!" My blood ran cold. I thought it was the most cynical thing I'd ever heard. I trembled for my nation, if that was the kind of leader we had. Joseph and I had terrible feelings of foreboding as we went home that day. Yet, somehow, I couldn't get those

words out of my mind: “One man must die for the people”.

Just a few weeks later they got their chance. It was Passover again—the time when the people of Israel were protected in Egypt from the Angel of Death by the blood of a lamb. They bribed one of Jesus’ followers to betray him. They arrested him in the middle of the night. They dragged him before the Sanhedrin while it was still dark, which was illegal for a start. His trial was a travesty of justice. It was obvious he had been already struck in the face. The witnesses who had been paid to frame him couldn’t even get their stories to agree. Throughout the whole thing Jesus remained silent. In the end the High Priest was getting frustrated and did what was totally illegal—he got Jesus to condemn himself out of his own mouth. He put him on oath and asked him if he was the Christ, the Son of God. We were about to protest, but without hesitation Jesus said, “I am! And one day you will see me sitting at the right hand of Almighty God and coming on the clouds of heaven!” For one moment there was shocked silence and then there was an explosion of noise. Caiaphas smiled triumphantly and managed to make himself heard: “You have heard the blasphemy. How do you vote?” That’s when Joseph and I beat a hasty retreat. We knew all was lost, and we didn’t want any part of it.

They dragged Jesus off to Pilate, the Roman Governor, and were clever enough to change the charges there. They accused him of political conspiracy and painted themselves as good Roman citizens—the hypocrites! By nine o'clock Jesus was crucified. By three in the afternoon, he was dead. At Passover time... When the people were saved by the blood of a lamb... "Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"... "One man must die for the people." At last the pieces began to fall into place.

That very day I went with my good friend Joseph to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus. Joseph had recently had a tomb cut out of the rock for himself, and he wanted to show his respect for Jesus by giving him a decent burial. Pilate was surprised to hear Jesus was already dead, but when he checked this was indeed the case, he seemed glad that we had come and he gave permission. We took his body down from the cross. That was a fearful thing to do. But in the end we managed it. And we laid him in the cold stone tomb and we reverently wrapped him in white linen with all the right spices. Then we got the huge stone rolled down into place across the entrance. And even then his enemies had to interfere. They had Pilate seal the stone and put a guard on it. Much use that was! On the third

day the stone was rolled back up, the tomb was empty and Jesus was alive again!

But you see, it was before all that, before we knew for certain who he was, that in the end I had openly confessed. In the beginning I had wanted Jesus on my own terms. Then I had wanted him to answer my questions. After that I had wanted him to get a fair hearing. At one stage I wanted him less than I wanted praise from men. But in the end I just wanted Jesus. It might not have seemed to be the best time to choose, when it was only his dead body that was left. In fact I suppose his cause in this world was never lower than at that moment. But sometimes you just have to come into the light.

John 2:23-3:16, 7:45-52, 12:42,43, 19:38-42