

## ***The Gospel of Nicodemus***

By Dr. Dave Neale

One of the reasons I love the Gospel of John is because he doesn't seem to have ever read the synoptic gospels. Either he didn't have them, or he didn't like them, either of which would explain why he seldom refers any of the teachings and parables of Jesus found in Matthew/Mark/Luke.<sup>i</sup>

When he does, he repurposes the material to suit his world view. Pastor Sylvia tackles the feeding of the 5000 which becomes a long teaching on the Bread of Life in John

John just chose to present a really unique view of the story of Jesus, based largely on other sources the synoptic writers did not have. Isn't it fascinating that in preserving these stories about the life of Jesus the early church embraced the diversity inherent in four gospels.

The gospels teach us to embrace diversity!

Who is Nicodemus? He is only known to us from John's gospel (also see 7:50 and 19:39). He is a Pharisee. A "teacher of Israel" Jesus calls him.<sup>ii</sup>

Nicodemus is presumably a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of Jerusalem, a very august body of religious leaders indeed. He is quite wealthy, as John 19:39 implies, as he brings a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes to the burial of Jesus' body. He seems to have become something of a friend of Jesus. An intimate. It's fascinating.<sup>iii</sup>

This is a nocturnal conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus, suggesting something of a back-channel approach by a prominent Pharisee on behalf of his colleagues. Notice the plural verbs, ...***we know that you are a teacher who has come from God.***

The structure looks like this. There are three comments by Nicodemus, followed by three responses from Jesus. Nicodemus first... ***We know you come from God because of the things you do...***<sup>iv</sup>

Jesus replied enigmatically... ***You must be born from above...*** The conversation revolves around this phrase in verse 3, a phrase repeated through out (also 4, 5, 6, 7, 8). The tension in the story is that Nicodemus misunderstands.<sup>v</sup>

He understands Jesus to be referring, rather comically, to a *physical rebirth*. Because, as it happens, *anōthen* can mean "again" or "above."

Nicodemus says... ***how can an old man*** (γερων, *gerōn*, I mean we are talking as old as 40! Cf Acts 4:22) ***be born again after having grown old?*** This is the famous misunderstanding of the great Pharisee teacher.

Jesus speaks not of a *physical rebirth* (again), but of a *spiritual rebirth* (from above). In fact, you cannot *see... or enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit*.

This comment, also somewhat enigmatic, refers to baptism by water, signifying repentance, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. I might refer you back to my message two weeks ago on this marvelous phrase. On the website, both the video and the written text.

The other clever aspect of the exchange is the homonym (a word with two meanings) of the description of the analogy of wind and spirit. As with *anōthen*, “wind” and “spirit” are two meanings of one Greek word, πνευμα (*pneuma*).

I hope I’m not confusing you!

This Spirit of God, just as it is with the wind, cannot be predicted or contained. It is the very presence of God blowing through human experience. You can’t really describe it, except by this analogy. But boy, you can sure see its effects – the movement in the trees like when the wind blows.

That is the essence of the teaching of this conversation. The unpredictability of the presence of the Spirit, and the inability we have to control the presence of the Spirit.

### **From the Text**

What do we learn about life and love from Nicodemus in this exchange?<sup>vi</sup>

Nicodemus can’t hear what the Saviour is saying. He can’t get there because he is in the grip of an inflexible religious view of the world. I’m not criticizing Pharisaism. In fact, the Pharisees were a deeply devout sect, committed to keeping everyday life holy. They weren’t all bad guys.

He is an open man, a questioning man. He comes to Jesus in good faith. But he doesn’t really understand Jesus. How could he? How could I?

***... You are a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?***

First, this teaches us that when we are closed in our beliefs, we can’t know the wind of God in our life experience. Like Nicodemus, we too become the victim of a rigid religious view of the world.

Jesus beckons him to adopt a whole new concept of spirituality.

We think of ourselves here at Vic Naz as creedal Christians. We recite the Nicene Creed together. But it is suggested in some quarters of Christendom (Emergent Church Movement) that we should abandon the age-old creeds and start over with only the love of Christ as our guide.

I say not, because it casts us adrift from the ancient traditions so hard won by the forebearers. Maybe our children or children’s children will feel differently. But for now, here we stand.

We don't adhere to the truths of the Creed to lock down spirituality – to make a reductionist ideology. We adhere to the Creed because these exalted ideas open us up to a world of continuous spiritual rebirth.

When we take Communion together we are opening ourselves to a continuous spiritual rebirth!

The old evangelical paradigm was to invite people to conversion as a one-time event, followed by a completely changed life. It happens occasionally, I'm sure.

But, after all, none of us are Paul on the road to Damascus. Isn't it kind of amusing how the evangelicalism of that era adopted the error of Nicodemus in describing the Christian experience as being "born again." When we should have been saying all along, born from above.

What we really mean to say when we are talking about this invitation to the Baptism of the Holy Spirit is this: Come to the altar...or stay where you are... but enter into a *continuous spiritual rebirth blowing through your being by the grace of Christ Jesus our Lord.*

And through this experience we find God changing us daily more into the likeness of Christ. This is a dynamic, exciting journey of faith in the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Doesn't that make you want to get up each morning and have another go at life!?

Jesus is trying to help Nicodemus see that life can be all about experiencing the exhilaration of the wind of God's Spirit moving through the trees of our hearts.

Nicodemus is a nice guy, but he is rigid in his thinking. Blinded by his blinkered views of spirituality and God.<sup>vii</sup>

How do we move forward from the great lostness of our times? How do we open up the gates to this experience. Good question!

We had a ski holiday at Christmas so it's time for me to dust off the skiing metaphors. The best snow for skiing is in the trees. This is because it is shielded from the sun, which can make snow crusty and heavy. And the snow in the trees is shielded from the wind, which compacts the snow.

The problem is, it's in the trees.

But a good run of powder in the trees is heaven itself. It's like floating, like being weightless as the champagne snow compresses beneath your skis and pops you out – you turn your body in the air, and down you go. You can do all day without getting tired if you have the right technique.

But, it's very hard skill to teach (Christine and I were ski instructors at one point in our lives), because... it's in the trees! Flying down a hill through the trees is inherently hazardous!

Here is the trick. Never look at the trees. Always look at the space between the trees! Look where you want to go, not at what you are really hoping you will miss.

Life is full of problems, isn't it? I'm not suggesting we don't take our problems seriously, but it is so easy to spend life only fretting about the problems!

I think the force of this description of the Spirit-filled life by Jesus is that there is always something unsettling about the movement of the Spirit. The Gospel of Nicodemus teaches us to let go and allow the overwhelming grace and love of God be set free in our lives.

Christine and I have spent our lives floating on the winds of an unpredictable Spirit within us. We have this photo of us, just after marriage, with my old Ford and a U-Haul trailer heading out for seminary at 22. Life has been a series of unpredictable episodes.

I've taught 1000s of university kids. Written books. Transformed two Bible colleges into Christian universities. I completely changed a government consortium. I've now been a pastor to a congregation.

We all need to be open to whatever direction the wind of the Spirit is blowing us. The best advice I could give you is 'have faith in God.'

But Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus teaches us to look for the space between the problems. Jesus beckons us to be liberated by grace and *the experience of continual spiritual rebirth* – a life continually renewed in the Spirit.<sup>viii</sup>

*Maranatha*, Come Lord Jesus, the early church said.

[Worship team come]

Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Water into wine at the wedding (2); healing the official's son (4); healing the cripple man (5); feeding the 5000 (6); walking on water (6); healing the blind man (9); raising Lazarus (11). When he does report synoptic miracles, he changes them and repurposes the material as signs." There are seven miracles in John, described as "signs."

<sup>ii</sup> There are three such journeys to Jerusalem in John, whereas the synoptic gospels only have Jesus going to Jerusalem once at the end of his life.

<sup>iii</sup> The Pharisees get really rough treatment in the gospels, largely because they are the "bad guys" in the narrative. John is especially problematic in the way he uses the term "the Jews." And it has an unpleasant almost antisemitic taint to it.

But if you remember by the time the gospel is written, the 90s CE, a lot of Christians have been martyred in the conflict that flared up between the Jewish homeland and the Roman empire. Jerusalem lay in ashes. The church had to flee to Pella, many were killed in the Great Revolt. The conflict with Judaism has become a nasty reality for the church.

Nicodemus is an example of many among the Pharisees who believed, and these were they who spoke in Jesus' defense during his life and in Christian's defense in the years to come (cf Acts 23:9).

<sup>iv</sup> In Acts 4:15ff, Peter had healed a lame man, the text notes that this was remarkable because he was... over 40! When hauled before the authorities they conceded that ...**it was obvious to all... that a notable sign had been done.** It was hard to deny that something was going on... (compare Acts 23:9).

<sup>v</sup> This phrase in Greek is γεννηθῆναι ἀνωθεν (*genēthē anōthen*).

<sup>vi</sup> Just as an interesting side-bar, there is a 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christian apocrypha called the Gospel of Nicodemus, the supposed recovered record of the trial before Pilate. Curiously, Pilate is presented as a pious man who is eventually martyred by Caesar for allowing Jesus to be crucified. Pilate is celebrated as a martyr and saint in Coptic Christianity.

<sup>vii</sup> All ideological rigidity in the world, all extremism is to be abhorred. But especially in its religious forms: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, atheist, political ideologies that have become religious in tone, like American evangelicalism. It's true that God gave Canaan to Israel years ago. In reality Israel held the land God "gave" to them for a couple of hundred years out of the last 3200 years of history. And that hold was never uncontested. It was never free and clear. It was never without suffering and full of justice and peace. For almost the whole of that time the land of Israel has been occupied by other powers.

And yet, in the name of nationalism and the divine right to the land, each tribe and people kill others for the sake of land. The problems of war are becoming very alarming in 2024. There are at least two very perilous axes of conflict: Ukraine/Russia/NATO and Gaza/Israel/Iran.

Extreme ideology is at the basis of these axes. Consider the extreme religious rigidity of Hamas, consider the extreme religious rigidity of the hard right in Zionist Nationalism. We used to think supporting Israel was a Christian duty. That is no longer the case, in my view. The country has fallen into dangerous hands.

Each aggressor believes they have a divine right to land, becoming a justification for destruction and mass killing and bombs. The idea of a divine right to land has been the sorrow and undoing of humankind

Think of the North American continent where the original inhabitants were shunted aside and deprived of land they had occupied from time immemorial. We can't reverse what was done to the First Nations. We can't go back – there isn't a do over for history.

<sup>viii</sup> We need to be like the old Methodists. John Wesley and his friends established prayer groups in 1729 at the University of Oxford. Students derisively called the meeting the Holy Club. Enthusiasts, they said. Why, not only did the engage in disciplined spirituality, "methodists" they sniffed in contempt, but they "took food to poor families, visited lonely people in prison, and taught orphans how to read."