

**Pentecost 01 B, May 26, 2024**

**Nicodemus**

**Read: John 3:1–21 and/or memorize: John 3: 5 NLT**

**They say, "there is no fool like an old fool." And I am afraid that is exactly what I have been. I've been so busy protecting our religion that I have been missing our God. I should explain. My name is Nicodemus. I am a member of the Sanhedrin, one of the 70 men charged with the oversight and defense of our historic and honorable faith. We are to provide guidance for the people in matters pertaining to God, to oversee worship and to challenge any who would seek to lead the nation astray.**

**I was born into one of the most respected families in Jerusalem. I won't bother you with all the details of my education, but just tell you that I learned the Torah as thoroughly as any man. I enjoyed the study of the law; after all, the law was God's gracious gift to us for the ordering of our lives.**

**We Pharisees have enjoyed a remarkable growth in our numbers and are now the majority. Even though the Sadducees are a minority, they are still very powerful. The high priest himself comes from the party of the Sadducees. There is one big difference between the two groups: Pharisees believe that this life is not all there is to existence, so when Jesus talks about an afterlife, we agree. The Sadducees do not believe that.**

**We believe in a resurrection of the body when Yahweh finally comes to establish His Kingdom on earth. Considering all the injustice in the world and oppression of us suffered at the hands of first one nation, and then another, there must be something beyond this life to right all the wrongs.**

**Let's face it: there is injustice and oppression that is suffered, which is not rectified in this life, and if our God is a god of Justice, which I believe He is, something will have to be done about that. I believe justice will eventually be done, but not until the day of resurrection.**

**We got our teachings from the prophets of old as well as the writings of antiquity, which we consider as inspired scripture. My Sadducee brothers accept no writing as scripture, except the books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, which are called the Torah. Because they don't say anything about afterlife, the Sadducees will not accept it.**

**For myself, as I say, the concept of resurrection is very appealing. I suspect you might feel the same? Besides, why should we consider that our God's mind is limited to what was**

passed on through Moses? Perhaps there was no reason to discuss the resurrection with Moses. My brothers in the Sanhedrin know my position. That makes me, at least in their eyes, a liberal thinker. I don't worry about that.

And, liberalism has its limits. I can accept the Sadducees and their understandings. I can accept other groups and their different beliefs. But I cannot accept anyone who might do permanent damage to our historic understanding of our faith.

I traveled down to the Jordan to investigate this man called the baptizer. Word had come that he had been having a remarkable impact on all who came in contact with him. Well, I felt an obligation to see whether or not what he was teaching followed the orthodox tradition.

I admit John was an impressive fellow. He may have been influenced by those who are ascetic's, wearing sackcloth, living in the desert and eating only things like locusts and wild honey. He was a thunderous preacher, calling to people to repent of their sins; baptizing them in the river. We only baptize converts to Judaism. It seems that all Jerusalem has come to see him and be baptized. And even the Roman soldiers were inspired by him and went under the water at his urging.

During one of his open-air sessions, we questioned him as to his authority to do what he was doing. Some from our group wondered if he might be the Messiah; others wondered whether or not he could be the reincarnation of Elijah the prophet. We wanted to find out.

To be sure, we did not mind itinerant preachers, for there were many; but we did want to keep tabs on those who gathered large groups. He responded to our questioning in a strange way. He admitted that he was neither the Messiah nor Elijah. He claimed that he was, in the words of Isaiah, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, saying: 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'"

Then he said something even more remarkable: he said another would come even greater than he. He said he would not be worthy to untie his sandals, something that is done by the lowest slave in the household. We wondered about that, but there was nothing he was doing that called for action, at least not at that time. So, we returned to Jerusalem to report our findings to the Sanhedrin.

Soon, our attention became focused on someone who was making an even greater impact than John. In fact, we heard that a number of John's disciples were now following Jesus. He

was a new teacher, from Nazareth. I don't understand why anybody would follow a man from Nazareth.

Unlike John, He did not limit Himself to preaching. He did not baptize anyone, at least that we know of, but He was certainly not an ascetic, like John. In fact, He was something of a party boy, eating and drinking with some of the worst riffraff in our nation: tax collectors, prostitutes, people that no self-respecting, God-fearing man would ever associate with.

But the biggest difference between Jesus and John was what Jesus did. Word had it that Jesus was performing remarkable miracles: healing the sick and lame, giving sight to the blind; even restoring the dead to life. These stories were incredible, but highly suspect, at least to me.

We weren't terribly concerned about Jesus except for one distressing incident. Just prior to the recent Passover, our most important day of remembrance, Jesus and his cohorts, came into the temple courts and ran riot. Now, He did not desecrate the temple itself, nor did He do any permanent damage, but He upset some powerful people.

He went to the Court of the Gentiles, the very largest part of the temple. It was there that the money changers sat to exchange the coin of the realm for temple script. In addition, those who were selling animals for sacrifice also offered their goods there. He made a whip of cord and drove the merchants into the street, fleeing for their lives.

As He did this, He was shouting, " people were turning his Father's house into a den of robbers." Now, I will admit that some of those merchants were charging exorbitant fees. Even worse, some merchants were paying the priests to reject the animals that the people brought for sacrifice, so they would have to buy more expensive animals from the dealers. These merchants were there by express permission of the high priest. Some of them were even his relatives. No wonder the council was concerned.

To be sure, some of my brothers were more than a little distressed. They wanted to know by what authority Jesus had done this so they went to Him and asked. His answer was unclear. Especially when He said, "destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days." That made no sense. It had taken 46 years to build the temple.

So last night, I took it upon myself to find out more. I had not been authorized to do this, but my position gave me my authority. To be honest with you, I didn't just go to find out as a member of the council. I was interested in Him myself

I went at night because He would be less busy. We sat out in the cool breeze talking. I was open with him. I asked him to share the message God sent to Him. His response at first sounded odd. He said, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born again."

I understood what he was talking about a little bit. We use some of the same imagery when we talk about Jewish converts. What I found incredible was not the thought, but the possibility. Jesus made it sound like it was real.

I responded, making it sound like He was taking literally, I questioned how that could be. He answered, "No one enters the Kingdom of God without being born of the water of his mother's womb and the Spirit of the Heavenly Father." Not to explain how it is difficult to understand, but entirely possible. He was beginning to make sense to me.

I wanted to know more. I asked, "How can this be?" And He said it would only happen by faith in Him. It was just as when Moses held the snake figure on the pole and the people were healed when they looked at it after being bitten. He said people would need to look to Him when He was lifted up.

I wish I could say that the light came breaking through to me that night and all the questions were answered. We said shalom and I left Him, He had no idea whether I understood or not. But I did, for the most part, and that is why I know the truth of that old adage, "there is no fool like an old fool."

Because your brother Nicodemus has been an old fool for not taking seriously the power of the Spirit of the Living God to work miracles. How He changes the hearts of those who truly become His children. There is something profound and wonderful about this Jesus. I suspect that, as time goes on, more and more people will come to know how special He is.

By the time I reached my house, my heart was pounding, my breathing was quickened. I realized that the Spirit of God was working within me, changing me, making me as if I had been born again, to use Jesus' phrase. As I stood in the grassy courtyard, I looked up towards the stars, stretched my arms to heaven, and prayed, "God of my fathers, give me that new life. This old fool does not want to be a fool anymore." Could it be that you also want to make that same prayer in the name of Jesus?

Count me in: Have you been an "old fool? How will you let the Holy Spirit change you?