



Jesus and Nicodemus by Crijn Hendricksz,

In this morning's Gospel Passage from John 3, we meet Nicodemus, a Pharisee. He was a member of the Sanhedrin Court, composed of the 70 most prominently recognized men in Jerusalem, the highest governing body in the Nation of Israel. This night time conversation with The Christ had a powerful effect on the life of Nicodemus. We meet him again twice in the Gospel of John. In John 7, Nicodemus actually takes the part of Jesus against the entire rest of the Council, reminding them that according to Jewish Law, a man cannot be condemned before he is heard and examined. Then, in John 19 it is Nicodemus who goes with Joseph of Arimathea to beg the body of the Christ, following his agony and death upon the Cross.

John Chapter 3 contains the most quoted verse in the entire New Testament, John 3:16, which you will often see on bumper stickers and football game placards, "For God so love the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." However, let me propose to you this morning, that the real center of this passage is actually a question. The crux of this morning's Gospel passage is actually the simple question posed by Nicodemus in John 3 verse 9: "How can these things be?" You see, Jesus has posed a situation for Nicodemus that seems clearly impossible, for he says that no one can enter the Kingdom of heaven unless he is born again. And for Nicodemus, this is clearly an implausible scenario. For how can any human being be born into this life more than once?

Jesus' answer is intriguing, if we can stop and think about it for just a moment. He tells Nicodemus, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not know these things? Nicodemus," the Christ is saying, "you are a scholar and a leader of God's people. You above all people should know how time and time again in history, God has saved his children in the most miraculous, unthinkable ways." The story of Noah's salvation from the waters of the flood; the parting of the Red Sea in the escape from Pharaoh; the provision of mana from heaven to feed the tribes wondering in the desert. Over and over again, God has proven his love for His children through the most inexplicable, amazing ways, ways that defy earthly logic. And you, Nicodemus, you who know better than most the evidence of this love down through the centuries as recorded in the Law and the Prophets, you don't understand how He can still act even against the accepted laws of nature to bring His children home to Him?"

What Jesus is actually asking Nicodemus for is an act of profound faith. The Lord is asking Nicodemus to believe; to believe strongly in something that is absolute foolishness by this world's standards, which is to be born again. For this world has nothing to do with such mumbo jumbo, such a ridiculous idea of the need to be born anew, in order to truly be the children that God would have for His own. To enter the Kingdom of Heaven, the Christ is saying, you have to make absolute acts of absolute faith.

That's really what the Old Testament account of Genesis 12 is about this morning. The Lord God instructs Abraham to leave his home, and his relatives and work. In short God asks Abraham to abandon everything he has worked for in this life and to follow God's lead into a new life of unknowable mystery. God asks Abraham for an act of absolute faith. And so, at the very beginning of the story, God plants the seed for His children, the seed of faith which will one day come to beautiful flower in this same faith in the living Lord of infinite love, the Lamb, Our Lord Jesus. You see, the whole Bible is really about Jesus. It always has been.

In this conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus goes on to say one thing more that I think we need to ponder carefully. He says in verse 12, "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?" "Nicodemus," God is saying through His Son, "You want an answer to your questions about things of heaven. But I tell you the truth Nicodemus, my answers for you about a life of faith is not just about your heavenly reward. I require you to apply these same acts of faith to earthly things as well."

I am sovereign of the entire universe of my creation, and I will act in this world, in this now, in this generation. But, I still require of you faith in you're here and your now – acts of faith in me, if you are to be my child."

The entire Christian theology of salvation rests on this one principal of faith. Paul sums it up beautifully this morning, perhaps more beautifully than anywhere else in the Bible. In this passage from Romans 4, in verse 5 Paul writes, "to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." It is not by our own efforts that we become God's children.

No, it is by faith, by submitting to a trust in God that we are brought into God's family, and into the glorious company of the righteous ones, the saints in light. This, then is the miracle of our salvation, made possible by a crazy, illogical, gloriously ridiculous trust in The Lord Christ.

All the readings for today revolve around the concept of faith in Christ. And surely, we can all agree that it is by grace through faith in Christ that we are saved. But just as we discovered on Wednesday night that the concept of Christian hope has changed through the centuries, so has what you and I know as faith become something different from what it was understood to be by the early church. Someone who does something significant for a community is said to have achieved some "street creds, some credit in the neighborhood." And when he says eternal life is accessible for all who "believe" in Jesus, the "belief" the Apostle John is talking about here is more along the lines of the English verb "to credit," which means "to bring honor to," "to place trust in," "to reflect well upon."<sup>1</sup> The "belief" in Jesus that we Christians espouse today is usually a kind of conviction. But the "believing" that John was writing about was really much more active and **relational** than convictional. This kind of belief has much more to do with living life so that we are putting credit (*pistis* in Greek) in, and giving credit to our loyalty and faith in the Lordship of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> So, what will you today to live your life through an active living out of your belief in Jesus? How will you through your faith give credit to what you say when you call yourself a follower of Jesus Christ. Because the true belief in Jesus that saves mankind is not just a profession of faith. It is also our living in relation to Christ and to each other so that our God really does reign.

So, in this season of Lent, I need to ask you, how is your faith? Are you still struggling with worries, and doubts? Are you still giving yourself over to a frenetic life of desperately rushing through your "to do" list, so that you arrive worn out at the conclusion of each exhausting day? Are there things in your life, resentment, petty jealousy, closely held grudges against friends and family – are there stumbling blocks in your life that rob you of the joy God longs you to have? If any of this is true, then I bring you great good news. Because, you see this season of Lent is not a season of sorrow, but one of wondrous joy.

Yes, it's Lent! This is the time of letting go. This is the time of turning away from the things of this world that keep us from being the joyous, peaceful, loving Children that God would have for His own. So, I invite you to a new life, yes, a life of new birth full of acts of joyous, freeing faith, faith in the one who really does triumph over all, the one who has never and will never fail us. I invite you all to a blessed, faith-filled, strangely joyous season of Lent.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

JWB+ 3-09-17

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/credit>

<sup>2</sup> In fact, according to the ancient history scholar Kate Cooper who writes about the early church in books like her *Band of Angels*, the Greek word "*pistis*" which we translate as "to believe" is still used in Greece today to mean "credit," as with the banking institution