

Sermon Archive 346

Sunday 30 May, 2021

Knox Church, Ōtautahi, Christchurch

Lesson: John 3: 1-17

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



It's not clear who said the following, but it's good that she said it. She said: "There's so much of my former self that I don't resonate with anymore, but I love her just the same. She was growing. She was doing her best. She fought hard to get me here."

-ooOoo-

His former self is Nicodemus, and is described by John the gospel writer as "a Pharisee". As a Pharisee, he's a person of the Book - the sacred book all about God. He reads sacred texts; he interprets them. He has discussions with other readers, trying to work out exactly what they mean for here and today. Sometimes the discussions take on the air of an argument - of course. When two ideas (opposing ideas) bump into each other, things **can** get heated. Some people love the heat - they thrive in it. They join debating societies and ring talkback radio. Others hate the heat, and would rather withdraw. I'm not sure which category the former self of Nicodemus fell into. I suspect he may be wearying of the arguing - or at least wondering whether hammer-and-tongs argument is the best way to truth. Or maybe that's a bit of projection of my self onto his self. Who knows.

Nicodemus's former self is described not just as a Pharisee, but also as "a leader of the Jews". And we know from other texts that he's a member of the Jerusalem-based governing council - the Sanhedrin. Chaired by the annually elected High Priest, the Sanhedrin's a council of 71 people, responsible for civil and religious law. They presided over a complicated mix of religion and politics. Do they mix? Religion and politics? In the Sanhedrin, they definitely do. You can argue about God, then argue about taxes. You can argue about a definition of blasphemy, then argue about which blasphemer should be handed over to Rome.

During the time of Nicodemus's former self, apart from all its usual, on-going responsibilities, the Sanhedrin would have had three special concerns presented by their current circumstances.

Circumstance One: their country had been occupied by the Roman Empire. There

were Roman soldiers about, on street corners, in kiosks in cathedral squares, in any and all of those moving, shifting places where conversations might go on about loyalties, public mood, disgruntlement about taxes. Rome was watching, listening. Rome wasn't caring, particularly, about art, culture, faith. Rome was caring about civil order - people being cooperative. And to the extent that the Sanhedrin was concerned not to stir up trouble with Rome, the Sanhedrin's concern was to keep people cooperative, orderly. Any political body, you'd think, would be concerned for order (unless it's Thatcher declaring war on Argentina in 1982, Trump causing riots in Washington in 2021, China provoking violence in Hong Kong in order to justify cracking down on protests in 2020). So, not always, but generally, political bodies will value peace and order. It's particularly so for the body to which Nicodemus (in his former self) belonged. A concern for order, for peaceful predictability, for the keeping of things within their expected boxes.

Circumstance Two: because they were occupied, and much of their political autonomy had been lost, people would have been wondering who now they were. Are we Israel anymore? Who are we, when we're no longer free? Are we in danger of losing our identity and just becoming part of some great amorphous foreign thing?

In times like this, the Sanhedrin are going to want to provide their people with something that's not threatening to Rome, but reassuring to the people. And that's going to come in the form of their national traditions: the things they wear, the songs they sing, the holidays they keep, the temple rituals they observe. Their traditions. These will hold them together as a people, while they pay taxes to Rome. The Sanhedrin to which the former Nicodemus belongs will have a greater concern than its previous manifestations to keep the traditions. Lose some of the civil matters, so focus on the religious and cultural ones instead.

Circumstance Three: give confidence to the people by being confident themselves - be leaders who are not shaken, but who are strong. What does strength look like to frightened, uncertain people? Strength is probably considered to look like "knowing what you're doing", not changing your mind all the time, having a plan and sticking to it. (Tell us what Level we're at; make clear for us what's required.) That's what I think the circumstances have done, in the time of the former Nicodemus, to the religious / political group he belongs to. Whatever on-going responsibilities they might have had, the current circumstances have shifted their priorities as a governing body: law and order, firm tradition, strong-man leadership that sticks to a plan.

And if that puts other things to the back burner for a while (like reading sacred

text and wondering what it means), then so be it. We're all clay in the hands of the particular needs of the day. The day calls us to re-prioritize. The day may call us to cut a blasphemer loose for the sake of the order (it might; it needn't, but it might). I wonder what Nicodemus's former self will think about all this.

I know what **John** thinks Nicodemus's former self thinks. John presents him as someone whose coming to Jesus is a "coming in from the dark". As someone responsible to God's story, yet dealing with the religion and politics of his time, he's described as someone who's looking for light while contained by the dark. From the Sanhedrin, he comes to Jesus by night.

-ooOoo-

I wonder if you've found it irritating that I've insisted on calling Nicodemus "Nicodemus's former self". It has been linguistically fiddly. But I've done it because it's important to note that Nicodemus's meeting with Jesus has been part of him becoming someone new (someone born to another life). (*"There's so much of my former self that I don't resonate with anymore, but I love her just the same. She was growing. She was doing her best. She fought hard to get me here."*) The next time we hear of Nicodemus, he's reminding his colleagues in the Sanhedrin that they can't just do away with Jesus because they feel like it. They have to give him a proper hearing. (That's just a matter of procedure, of course - not an expression of sympathy for the cause of Jesus. [John 7: 50-51]) By the end of the gospel [John 19], though, Nicodemus is helping various others take Jesus down from the cross and making sure he's given the dignity of a proper burial. Nicodemus has moved from being "an enquirer by night" to being "a supporter by the full light of day". The new Nicodemus is someone who almost might be described as having been "born of the Spirit - having been given a second life".

Propelling him along his way to this second life, the **interim** Nicodemus has this first (perhaps only) critical engagement with Jesus. In it, Jesus describes the Spirit of God as a wild wind, the direction of which is unclear, unpredictable. I wonder how that sits next to the insistence of his contemporaries that everything ought to be orderly and still. Jesus talks about faith as a "becoming new", a departing from the old. I wonder how that sits next to the emphasis his contemporaries place on tradition, the importance of the old ways. And then, Jesus teases him "you're a teacher of Israel, but you don't know anything about the things I'm talking about". I wonder how that sits next to his contemporaries' modelling of leadership as confidence, as knowing everything, as never changing mind or tack. What the

interim Nicodemus meets here, in this conversation with Jesus, is a contradiction of what he's told the times require of him concerning proper faith. It's a contradiction that many would throw away for the sake of stability, the sake of governance, the sake of the part he plays in keeping society narrow and straight.

But perhaps Nicodemus is discovering that none of those things are his ultimate concern. His ultimate concern is finding that God who's been hiding in the old texts he's read - the same God he believes may now have crept out of the texts into the life of the world as Jesus does what he does. Does Nicodemus care for Rome? Does he care for order? Does he care for tradition? Does he care for leadership posing as strong? His former self may have. His interim self might. His new self won't. His **new** self is entertaining the wind and being born anew. "There's so much of my former self that I don't resonate with anymore, but I love her just the same. She was growing. She was doing her best. She fought hard to get me here." God called her along the way in a conversation with Jesus.

-ooOoo-

None of us here is a governor of our people. Each one of us **is** a person moving on from a former self to a new creation. Probably not many of us worry too much about maintaining order, tradition and the confidence of others. But probably **all of us** have some appreciation of what the times, politics, zeitgeist and institution do to us, in terms of the high duties we end up letting go of (the duty to wonder, the duty to look for God, the duty to chase the wind and see the kingdom). We're all moving along that road from dark to light - from former self to something called the apprehension of eternal life.

"There's so much of my former self that I don't resonate with anymore, but I love her just the same. She was growing. She was doing her best. She fought hard to get me here." And she was willing, by night, to talk with Jesus.

We keep a moment of quiet.