"Nicodemus, the Silent Believer"

It is easy to have 20/20 hindsight and say: “Well, if I were here or there or wherever… I would have done this or handled that situation this way or said it this way.” It is always much easier to make decisions in retrospect. In thinking about people of the Jesus’ Passion, I have wondered whether Nicodemus might have felt any remorse that he did not do more to prevent Jesus’ arrest, beating, and death. Did he ask himself later if he could have done something differently to help Jesus?

You may remember Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. The cover of night gave him the ability to talk with Jesus alone, away from the crowds. He could speak with Jesus teacher to teacher: he a teacher and leader among the Jews and Jesus a teacher with signs from heaven. “Could Jesus be the Messiah?” Nicodemus wondered. He looked at this as an opportunity for continuing education. So he came to Jesus at night.

But choosing the night time wasn’t entirely noble of Nicodemus. He wanted time with Jesus to himself. But he wanted it to be…to himself. He wanted to be undetected by the other leaders of the Jews—who, like him, were members of the Jewish ruling council. Jesus was not popular with most of them. They viewed him as a threat to their security and seethed at the way he seemed to flaunt some of their self-imposed church laws. They were jealous of the following he was commanding. If the council members smelled a rat in Nicodemus they would likely have turned on him and possibly deposed him from the council. He was concerned about not jeopardizing his good standing with them.

It was under the cover of darkness where Jesus changed Nicodemus’ life forever. The teachings of Jesus on the kingdom of God that evening included how Nicodemus needed a new life from the Holy Spirit; that God loved the world and gave his one-and-only Son; that whoever believes in the Son will not perish but have eternal life. Nicodemus did not understand all of what Jesus told him, but the seeds of his faith were sown that night. Much to ponder. He liked Jesus. He kept silent about his visit and kept his real feelings to himself. He had concerns and worries. He didn’t let on to the fact that he knew Jesus personally. The veneer of silence and stoicism on the outside, gave way to a rapidly churning mind and heart over the things taught this teacher by the Teacher.

The hostility level toward Jesus continued to ratchet up as time passed. The Jewish council didn’t hide their feelings – openly opposing Jesus, watching his every move and action, second-guessing his every word. They plotted his demise in their meetings. And, Nicodemus…he was silent. It was so bad, John begins his seventh chapter by saying: “Jesus went around in Galilee, purposely staying away from Judea because the Jews there were waiting to take his life.” During the final Feast of Tabernacles of Jesus’ life, the temple guard was given explicit instructions to arrest Jesus. When they returned empty-handed and were asked to explain why they failed, the response was: “No one ever spoke the way this man does.”

The Bible records for you that Nicodemus was part of this conversation. Imagine “ol’ silent Nic” hearing them say that. From experience he knows exactly what they are talking about. He vividly remembers the night just months ago when he sat next to Jesus – the cool, Mediterranean breeze at his back; the warm breeze of Jesus’ words rustling his heart. Oh, Nicodemus fondly remembers…he just doesn’t tell! His fellow companions? They can’t hide their hatred. “You fools! You just don’t know what is going on here! Has he deceived you too!? Nobody who is anybody – at least nobody important – believes in him. The rulers don’t. The Pharisees don’t. That mob gathered around him…they know nothing of the law…they are uneducated dolts…they are cursed.”

That’s it. Nicodemus – not ready to express his belief in Jesus – has had it up to here with all of the pious-sounding religious law talk. “You talk about not knowing the law? ‘Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?’ You yourselves are ignoring your own law in your plotting against this Rabbi from Galilee!” While that might be a great legal question, it falls light years short of
defending and confessing Jesus. The council’s response? Ridicule. Wondering if Nicodemus had been deceived by the Galilean. “Do a bit more studying Nic...prophets don’t come from Galilee.” Perhaps Nicodemus was left feeling discovered. Had they just guessed or pinpointed his real feelings about Jesus? If they had sleuthed him out it certainly wasn’t because he boldly confessed. He had tried to help Jesus and stare down his irrational peers. Yet the truth remained...he had failed to press the point and failed to confess Jesus.

It was six months later Caiaphas swayed of the need for Jesus to die. Only Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea did not consent. Neither did they strenuously object. Maybe they rationalized it was impossible to stop the brewing storm. Perhaps they remained consider about they continuing to enjoy their elevated social status. Then it happened. Late into the night of the Passover celebration came the knocking summons at his door. Jesus was under arrest and would be tried for his life. There was nothing right about anything. Nicodemus did not agree...yet, remained silent; swept along with the relentless tide of injustice.

I have wondered what changed Nicodemus. Might it be at Calvary where “push came to shove” for Nicodemus and he finally realized he had to break his silence? Jesus, hanging on the cross in torment. Nicodemus watching...feeling he had let it happen. He could have spoken out more emphatically; could have confessed his faith; should have prevented this murder. Coulda. Shoulda. Woulda. Did he marvel at how passively Jesus accepted his sentence? Had he heard Jesus’ heart on display from the cross: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” Did those words of forgiveness resound throughout his heart? Don’t you think Nicodemus – at least in his mind – needed those words more than any one else?

The seeds of faith planted in secret have now grown into a sturdy faith. A faith on display. Maybe it was there – underneath the cross – Nic decided not to hide his faith any longer. He would do whatever it took to help bury his Jesus. No matter if that meant he would have to face the wrath of his fellow councilman, he didn’t need them anymore. Nicodemus’ place was now with Jesus...even a dead Jesus...for he had Christ. Three days later must have brought incalculable joy to Nicodemus. The man he had buried...his Jesus...rose from the dead and appeared alive. Jesus’ death was not in vain. In death, Jesus won forgiveness for the sin of silence for Nicodemus and all sinners. He did not die because Nicodemus failed to speak. He died because he was on a mission to save the world. What might have been Nicodemus’ own personal resolution to break his silence about Jesus was cemented when Jesus appeared alive...how could he not speak about this!?!?

Now I ask: Are there any Nicodemuses here today? You understand that you are not that far removed from Nicodemus, don’t you? Do you choose to stay silent when you should be telling the truth about Christ Jesus? Are you intimidated by bold and threatening unbelievers? Do you always hedge your faith in Jesus trying to save face? Do you strain to express your faith, but feel like you do it so clumsy you hold back in weakness?

If you are fellow Nicodemus, I urge you to learn from Nicodemus’ example. Remember Jesus on the cross. Remember him buried in the cold darkness of the grave. Remember him burst into the warm sunlight of resurrection. If hesitation has been your modus operandi, don’t hesitate any longer. What can anyone do to you? You have Christ. He has forgiven your weaknesses and sins. Like Nicodemus, end the sound of your silence.