

John 3:1 – 21

Jesus at the centre

Faith on the sly?

At parkrun the other Saturday while wearing my purple cape with 25 on it, to mark my 25th volunteer stint, I recalled the time I was wearing my red Aberdeen scarf and a purple jumper and being told that the colours just didn't go! I shared something else about that day too. This was years ago (when the Dons were doing very well) – I went with my very keen supporter brother to Parkhead to see Aberdeen play Celtic. We parked a little way from the ground. I got out of the car and put on my red Aberdeen scarf. "Hide that until we get inside!" my brother exclaimed anxiously. Discretion was the better part of valour even then. To be honest, I never had any problem, but it was thought wiser to keep our colours under wraps just in case. Perhaps my brother was right – but it didn't seem quite right to me.

Perhaps some of you feel a bit like that with Nicodemus. If he was such a stalwart of the faith, why did he feel the need to approach Jesus secretly under the cover of darkness? He was a Pharisee and certainly later, a member of the Sanhedrin – someone very much in the public eye. Maybe he was just being cautious but at this stage in his spiritual walk he wasn't openly public about associating with Jesus.

There are Christians who are very upfront about their faith, some who are very disparaging about people who are not equally open about their faith. Ultimately, we are called upon to acknowledge Jesus, to witness to him and to ensure that our lives are consistent with his claims but let's remember that we all have to COME to faith – that for many it is a process not a sudden Damascus Road experience like Paul's. It's important that we are sensitive to those who are seeking Christ but who have not yet found him; to those who are sincerely questioning; to those who face serious opposition – not just those in countries like Sudan or in some Islamic countries but people here who face the anger of their families and friends for even daring to show interest in Jesus Christ. Let's not be too quick to criticise, far less condemn, those who are genuinely seeking.

It's vitally important that we are aware of where people are in this very mixed-up world in which we live. There are so many pressures, so many conflicting demands that are vying for people's attention. And we can't count on them having the grounding of faith on which to base their decisions. Most folk have heard the name of Jesus – but frankly haven't a clue about the basics of the Christian faith. The image of the Church portrayed nowadays is often negative, outmoded even bigoted. Tolerance and acceptance are the new watchwords. Religious conviction can be vilified as discrimination – and if it is Christian – even moreso. This is the world in which we live and we need to be alert to the challenges. We need to ensure that we are not discriminatory or unjust, that we are open both to listen to others and to explain our position but we cannot make out that every issue is a burning issue for us. Nor can we expect a free ride on everything that takes our fancy. That is not to say that we can compromise on everything. There will be issues that are so vital to the faith that we

have to make a stand. The difficulty is that Christians may differ on where they feel that they have to draw the line.

Jesus was always prepared to accept genuine questions. He didn't insist that Nicodemus declare his faith at the Sanhedrin – that would come later – at this point he was delighted to receive him, to question, to share with him and to offer him pointers. Faith on the sly? No, I don't think so. Rather an openness to explore the faith – and encouragement to consider moving from ideas to faith.

What can we do to be more open and welcoming to those who wish to explore religious belief, to ask questions about Christianity but who fear the ridicule or worse that might come their way if they were openly to show interest in Jesus or to those who are not ready for commitment? Jesus did not slam the door on Nicodemus and his questions and nor should we.

Jesus at the centre

Nicodemus recognised that God was important, he was impressed with Jesus' teaching and with his miracles, but he wasn't ready to commit himself to following him. He was interested, he wanted to learn more, but he held Jesus' at arms' length. He made an effort to approach Jesus (which was great), he was ready to explore the common ground that he shared with Jesus, but he wasn't ready to be personal with him. Don't get me wrong – that is absolutely necessary for a while – we don't (or at least we shouldn't) jump into any relationship without getting to know the other person – and letting them know us. Nicodemus sought to find out more about Jesus, explore the possibilities of faith and Jesus allowed him to do that without pressurising him, without being too demanding. But there was also challenge – “you must be born again or born from above.” Jesus made it clear to Nicodemus that he was delighted that he was showing interest, it was very commendable that he had an understanding of God and his purposes BUT that was not enough. He had to be spiritually renewed, born of the Spirit. Nothing that Nicodemus could bring from his religious experience, from his position as a Pharisee or Council member, NOTHING in himself could put him right with God – only receiving God's gift of the Spirit and being made alive spiritually would sort things out. Put bluntly, Nicodemus needed to come to point of putting Jesus at the centre. Like so many people today Nicodemus had to learn that Jesus was more than a good teacher, or a fine example - he had to come to see him as the living Lord, not someone with whom to discuss theology but someone to follow; not someone only to listen to but to worship and obey.

We sometimes talk about people being on the fringes – probably thinking about the fringes of the church. But we must remember that while Jesus loves each and every one of us, however, far ben (or otherwise) we are – A Christian is someone for whom JESUS is at the centre. Our lives are to revolve around him (not the other way round). Jesus is not only someone who can tell us about the way to God – he IS the way. The epitome of that came in Jesus' own crucifixion. John alludes to an incident in the desert where Moses used a bronze snake as a means of salvation. No snakes now – but the Son of God was himself lifted up on the cross as a means of salvation for everyone who puts their trust in him.

We must not despise those who are on the fringes – most of us will have been there. It's important that we come up with methods that will affirm those who are genuinely seeking the truth, we've to allow room for genuine searching and questions. (Most of us have been there, maybe we still are). BUT sooner or later we need to make it plain that Jesus is at the centre and must be for all Christians. The world (and the Church) and each of us is to revolve around Jesus Christ not the other way round. We're not doing that to be exclusive or discriminatory but because that is how it is. We must be encouraging, patient and speak and act with grace BUT that is an essential part of the message – Jesus HAS to be at the centre. The good thing is that God provides a way for us to let him be right there in the middle. He is willing to send his Spirit. The Spirit's job is to honour Jesus, point people to him as Lord and Saviour, and to equip us to worship and serve him. We're not on our own, it isn't up to us (at least not alone).

Jesus calls for a personal response (as he did with Nicodemus) but he is also patient and understanding. There is no stopwatch running. So, while we need to ensure that Jesus is at the centre of our lives AND do all we can to encourage others to have at the centre of theirs – we can trust God to work out his purposes for good in his own time. We are called to be faithful both in our speaking and our actions BUT ultimately the task of bringing in the kingdom is HIS. We cooperate, we share, we pray BUT the work is God's. We need to ensure that Jesus is given his true place – and that is – right at the centre, at the heart – our hearts, the heart of the church, the heart of the community and at the heart of everyone who is willing to receive him.

To them and to us he is more than willing to give eternal life. Why? Not because we've earned it but because he loves us so much – that is why he went to the cross.

Let's not be impatient with those who haven't yet found Jesus.

Let's be patient and understanding, ready to share, to answer genuine questions.

Let's encourage real seeking

But let's also do all we can to make sure that everyone knows that Jesus has to be at the centre, at the heart – and ensure that that is exactly where he is in our lives.

May the Lord bless you! Amen.