

Questions in the Dark

(Preached @ Footscray Baptist Church by Cheryl Williams, March 5th, 2023 - John 3:1-17)

I had tossed and turned all night, I couldn't get to sleep, so I got up and dressed in the dark, quietly so I didn't wake the rest of the household, I tiptoed downstairs and shut the door quietly.

Out into the cool dark night. The only light from the lamps in other houses that were still burning and a bit of moonlight.

It wasn't the first time I had done this, often I had gone out after dinner to meet with a colleague to talk about, discuss, even argue about the newest theological theory.

I think I had tossed and turned so much because I had much to think about. Let me introduce myself, my name is Nicodemus, I do okay, a nice house, a nice family. I am well educated, I am a well respected teacher of the law, a theologian. I am also a man of faith, but lately a few things have been troubling me.

The politics in my land is awful, occupied by the Romans, we have three heavyweights who can't agree on much – Pilate, Herod and Caiaphas. What's more a younger rabble rouser of a Rabbi has appeared and he is gaining quite a following. Jewish by background, but he seems to be teaching things that I never learnt. You see I learnt all about the law, all its intricacies and how it was connected to my faith. He seemed to disobey some of the law, especially about what you could do on the Sabbath, who you should associate with. Min you, he's done some amazing things -healing, calming storms, catching lots of fish, turning water into wine, but some of it I find a bit questionable. Allowing women to follow him, really! Eating with tax collectors and other sinners. Turning the tables over in the temple.

I think I just want to go and meet him, check him out for myself. He is allowing people to think he is the Messiah for whom we wait, now that's blasphemy, claiming to be God's son. I just want to ask him a few questions, see what he has to say for himself.

That's why I am walking the streets at night, well, also I don't want my colleagues to catch me talking to him. That would jeopardize my career, I'd be an outcast and ruin my reputation, not to mention cause shame to the family.

So, I walk the alley ways until I find him. I introduce myself to him and pay him a few compliments – don't want to get him offside just yet. I tell him that some of his actions have been very impressive and that clearly he is from God, otherwise he wouldn't be able to do these things.

Before I can get my first question out, he speaks and says, anyone who wants to see the kingdom of God must be born from above. What is he on about? I take him quite literally and ask how can you be born twice, it doesn't make sense. He then talks about

being born for water and of Spirit, and goes on about how the Spirit is uncontrollable. I am pretty puzzled, so I ask another question – how can that be?

He looks at me puzzled and a bit exasperated – how come a clever man like you doesn't understand? He goes on talking, even talking about Moses in the wilderness and raising a serpent on a stick and linking that to what will happen to him. Now I am really confused. Then, he talks about God loving the world so much he sent his son not to condemn it but save it – now he is talking theology, this I can get my head around, or can I? This is a bit of a challenge to everything I have learnt and believed – that God will save his people Israel and raise up a Messiah, he seems to be turning that around and suggesting that God loves all the world not just a special group and he seems to be suggesting that he is the long hoped for Messiah. So much for getting the clarity I was after, now I am very confused.

He has given me much food for thought so I leave and find myself back in the shadows. Let's just say I didn't get much more sleep that night. I must say there was something fascinating and likeable about him, he really cared, not just about me but about everyone. And he knew his Scripture, his history and his theology.

Jesus continued to both gain a following, and also upset a lot of my colleagues. I had spent a lot of time thinking about what he had to say to me and was beginning to think there was some truth in what he said.

I did meet him again. One day, after he implied, he might be the Messiah, some of my fellow Pharisees wanted him arrested – a few of them had really taken a dislike to him, maybe they were worried he was challenging our ideas – any way I found myself speaking up, standing up for him and suggested they should hear him out before they did anything drastic. They didn't listen to me.

The next time I knew about him he was riding through the city on a donkey, then he was arrested, tried on trumped up charges and sentenced to death. Before we could do anything he was hanging on a cross between two real criminals. This was too much for me, I had found one of my other colleagues Joseph had become just as intrigued by him as I had, and like him had begun to think this Jesus might just have been the Messiah and that the very least we could do was give him a dignified burial. So we did, Joseph had some land, I had all the right burial spices, so we went and asked for the body, to bury him properly – they gave him to us.

What a journey I began that night walking the darkened streets. Jesus challenged my ideas of God and God's relationship to humankind. He taught me that God was inclusive, that his love extended to all. He helped me understand that sometimes the strict adherence to our laws constrained God and sometimes was more about us holding power over people. He called me to step outside my ideas of who God was and to let God be God.

I became a follower of the way. I now know that God loves us all and for always. I know that Jesus is not just our example and yardstick but is indeed the very revelation of God. I know that God's Spirit is all around us, blowing where she will, not seen but experienced.

I am glad I stepped out into the dark that night with my questions, I was braver than I thought. As I asked my questions in the dark, I began to see the Light. Jesus changed me. Amen.