

We can learn many things through our ears. The oral teaching recitation method works the same way. It was used in the time of Jesus when preparing young students to be rabbis and teachers. The mention of a line or the theme from a biblical passage would call to mind the entire passage, the teachings on it and the meaning. Jesus often used this method when dealing with the religious leaders of his day. In our gospel reading today, we covered well known verses. One of them, John 3:16, may have been the first verse you ever memorised, except for the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept." We've heard John 3:16 enough that we understand that it is what Martin Luther called the gospel message in miniature. But do we know the context, the story behind it and how Jesus taught Nicodemus, an aged and senior Pharisee the truth of his coming?

Earlier in John chapter 3 we are told it was after dark when Nicodemus found Jesus away from his disciples. Nicodemus travelled after the sun had gone down so he would not be detected. He had not gone on official business. He had not gone to test Jesus. He was there because he had questions. He knew the scriptures and what Jesus was saying in public was not against the teachings of the scriptures. In fact, his words brought new light to the passages. Nicodemus was inquisitive but he was cautious. If other Pharisees and religious leaders found out he had met with Jesus, there would have been a shadow on his own reputation. As the old saying goes, "Lie down with dogs and you come up with fleas." So, Nicodemus was cautious and came at night in the cover of darkness.

The two had barely got into their conversation when Jesus threw out a line that would draw Nicodemus' mind back to a great scriptural story. Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness." The moment Jesus said that the entire story would have rushed through Nicodemus' mind.

In the book of Numbers 21:4-9, it reads, "They travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us." Moses prayed for the people. The Lord said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived."

Nicodemus's would have remembered this story. He would have pictured the bronze snake on the pole. He would have known the context of the passage, that the Jews were once again in rebellion against God. They complained once again that Moses had taken them out of their pleasant, peaceful life as slaves in abject poverty with little to eat and little to live for just for them to die in the desert. It amazes me and others how much the wandering Jews romanticised their lives in Egypt. They often wished to go back.

Nicodemus would have understood this story and the symbol for it was plain that the Saviour was the serpent lifted up. It may have shocked the old rabbi that Jesus claimed his deity then explained

very simply why he had come into this world in human form. He told Nicodemus that the Father had sent him to be lifted up so mankind could have eternal life.

Much like that serpent raised by Moses on a post, those who recognised they would die once bitten, had to look at it with belief in their hearts. Nicodemus struggled with this very simple explanation. He struggled because he was in darkness. We struggle too for the same reasons, preferring to lurk in the shadows of our faith.

Some have said that when Jesus illustrated that men do their deeds in the dark, that he was referring to Nicodemus coming at night in the veil of darkness. Although his approach to Jesus was not as the evil religious leaders would intend, it was to mask his approach. He loved his position and the perks that came with it more than the answer he received. Earlier in the Gospel chapter when Nicodemus heard he would need to be “born again” a new spiritual birth, he could not conceive of it. He was a learned Rabbi, a senior religious leader of the Jewish people. Wasn’t that enough to prove his love for God?

It is the same question many people ask today. I go to church. I read the scriptures I say my prayers. I have done and do good works in the Church and community. Isn’t that enough to prove that I am a believer?... No, would be Jesus’ answer. It isn’t enough... until we look upon the Son of Man lifted up on the cross and believe that he was offered up to pay for our sins. At that point our Lenten journey really and truly begins. For it all heads to that point where Jesus is nailed to a cross, dies for us and then is resurrected on Easter. That is what this season is about, put quite simply and profoundly: Look up at the Son of Man, believe and you will be saved.

Nicodemus continued to argue the point. He really didn’t get it at all. Jesus was quite direct. He let Nicodemus know that he couldn’t see the spiritual point because he was spiritually dead. Imagine how well that comment went over with Nicodemus. He was a “spiritual” leader of his people. He had studied the scriptures, the law, and all of the Old Testament, most likely twice as long as Jesus, and this young rabbi told the older, learned man that he was in spiritual darkness. He told him that he could not understand the spiritual implications of Jesus’ teachings because he was not born of the spirit. In other words, he was still spiritually dead.

Nicodemus argued with earthly logic. He wanted to know how he could be born again. He was a little too large to enter back into his mother’s womb and be born again. He missed the point. He did not see a need for a new birth. He did not see a need to have a spiritual awakening. He saw it in worldly terms and Jesus was dealing in spiritual reality.

Nicodemus was confusing his position within the synagogue and his religious duties with his spiritual life. He was putting the cart before the horse. He thought that if he did those things that meant he had a spiritual life. Jesus told him, no, you have to be born again spiritually for those things to mean anything. Having a spiritual life first comes before the good works of the faith.

Many historians believe that Nicodemus got the point and was later born again spiritually. Today we are looking at how this message of spiritual rebirth affects our Lenten journey. Are we relying on our position in the church, our service to the church and community and general good works as a substitute for a spiritual rebirth? If so, listen to the words of Jesus. “You must be born again.”

Amen.

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