

Lenten Meditation: Nicodemus reflects on the Words of Jesus from the Cross
“I am Thirsty”

I just had to be there. I had to see what was happening, or maybe I should say what I had allowed to happen. Though I am not sure that if I had not been silent whether things would really have been any different.

I had been drawn to this Jesus of Nazareth since I had first heard him preaching in Jerusalem. I had heard so much about his preaching and teaching and his miracles up in that northern region of Galilee. He was preaching with power and conviction, and the sick were being healed, sinners were repenting and turning to God, and demons were being cast out. Unfortunately, though, in the midst of all these good things he had this knack of upsetting people especially my fellow-Pharisees and leaders in the Sanhedrin. He healed people on the Sabbath and refused to follow so many of our rituals and customs which we believed had been given to us by God so we had a hard time believing that he could be from God. The way in which he called us hypocrites and kept pointing out our lack of concern for the poor and needy certainly did not win him any brownie points with my colleagues in the Sanhedrin.

I am not sure why I wanted to meet him. Maybe I really wondered whether what he was saying about God and about the ways of God’s kingdom were right. Maybe, though, I just thought I could help him to see how he would get along much better if he just toned down his criticism of my fellow-Pharisees a little bit. Whatever it was that drew me to him I knew that I could not let my fellow-Pharisees know my interest in this radical preacher and healer. When I finally did get up the courage to try to meet with him I requested a meeting at night so that no one might see us together. It was at this meeting that he looked me in the eyes and said, “Nicodemus, you must be born again, or born from above. I am not quite sure which he said but I knew either way I was confused. Yet as he told me that the

very reason he had come into this world was because God loved the world so much and that people might know God's gift of eternal life rather than being condemned by God, I found myself still confused by what he was saying and doing yet somehow I not ready to dismiss him as a crazy lunatic as many of my fellow-Pharisees wanted to do. (see John 3:1-21)

A little later when there was an attempt to arrest him I found the courage to speak to my fellow members of the Sanhedrin and to ask them, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" While they knew I had spoken the truth they really did not listen to me as they tried to treat me with contempt as they asked, "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee." Still, though, I was more ready to give this Jesus the benefit of the doubt than they were. (see John 7:50-51)

With my questions about this Jesus of Nazareth, then, you can imagine how I felt when I was called to a hastily arranged very early meeting of the Sanhedrin. My heart sank when Jesus was brought in by the Temple guard. I am ashamed to say that I did not have the courage to speak in his defense that night. I wanted to rise to his defense, but I was so afraid. I knew I could lose everything if I spoke out against the High Priest and the others who were involved in this charade. Even now I am embarrassed to tell you of my cowardice. At that time he was sentenced to death, and I had said nothing. I was so ashamed I dared not even look up at him. I just keep thinking back to that night on which we had first met and wondered what could I have done to make things different for him.

Later that morning, as they led Jesus out to be crucified, I wanted to run and hide. Yet as I struggled with what my silence had allowed and wondered whether if I had spoken up things would have been different, I felt drawn to go and to see what was going to happen to him.

As I gathered there with the crowd at the cross I was so ashamed of my fellow Pharisees and other members of the Sanhedrin who seemed to want to make a circus out of this man's suffering. It was bad enough that they had condemned this man whom I felt was innocent to suffer and die in this cruel, inhumane way, but even then they would not allow him the favor of dying in peace as they jeered at him and mocked him. I was absolutely ashamed that I had ever been associated with such people, and my silence at his trial began to play on my mind once again. Yet even there I did not feel comfortable giving them a piece of my mind. Once again I watched in silence as he hung there and suffered.

Near the end of his ordeal, after he had hung there for about six hours, he spoke again. He hadn't said a word in several hours. He cried out, "I am thirsty." As I heard him I was so glad to see that someone had the courage not to ignore his cry. I do not know who it was but I was grateful for that one who took a sponge and filled it with sour wine and put it on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. Hopefully it brought him some relief before he died.

I do not know whether it was seeing that one who had the courage to respond to his cry that gave me the courage to see what I could at least do for him in death. I just could not let him be thrown into some common, unmarked grave. When I started to do some checking I was so pleased that I was not alone in my thoughts and my desired actions and that even a fellow member of the Sanhedrin had been to Pilate to ask that he might take care of the body of Jesus. If only I had known that he also had been so impressed by this Jesus of Nazareth. What a difference could we have made if both of us had not been so afraid of losing our acceptance and popularity with our fellow-members of the Sanhedrin but had been ready to speak in his defense? It was too late now. But that one who at least had had the courage to reach out in front of that hostile crowd to give him a drink when he cried out, "I am thirsty," had at least given me the courage to follow his

example and not to be afraid to do what I could now for Jesus. I was not quite sure what I could do so I was so pleased when Joseph spoke of that tomb that he knew was available in that garden. It was the least I could do to bring some linen cloths and some spices in which we could wrap his dead body. It was too late for him to know what I was doing and how I was trying to help him but at least it made me feel good to do something good for him after the horrible way so many had treated him.

(Reflections based on Final Words from the Cross by Adam Hamilton, Abingdon Press, 2011, pages 65-66)

Like so many people, the Bible unfortunately does not tell us the rest of the story as far as Nicodemus, or Joseph of Arimathea, is concerned. We do not know whether their courage in taking the dead body of Jesus and giving it a proper burial lead to even greater courage to show themselves even to the other members of the Sanhedrin as followers of the Jesus whom they had crucified. There are various legends about what happened to both of them but the Bible tells us nothing further. Though we might like to know the rest of the story, the reflections of Nicodemus prompt us to think how often have we been silent when being a follower of Jesus should have meant we would be ready to speak and to make sure that truth was proclaimed and the innocent were not allowed to suffer? Think of your own life. Are there such times of which like Nicodemus you too would be ashamed?

(Time of Silence)

In the assurance of the words of Jesus to Nicodemus that God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn the world but that all people through him might have the gift of eternal life I would invite you to take a moment now to confess

those times of failure in your own life of which you are ashamed as you remember them. (Time of Silence)

As we think of the way in which, at least in our reflections, it was the one who reached out to respond to the cry of Jesus, “I am thirsty” by giving him a drink that encouraged Nicodemus to do what he could for Jesus after his death, I would invite you to think about who are some of the people in your life who have been examples of loving service to others who have inspired you to reach out to help other people as well (Time of Silence)

As we think about what the example given by such people has come to mean in your life, I would invite you to take a moment to give thanks to God for these people and for the way in which their example has changed your life.

(Time of Silence)

Unlike that person who responded to the cry of Jesus, “I am thirsty,” by offering him a drink, and unlike Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea we cannot reach out as they did to help Jesus but we remember the words of Jesus, “when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.” (Matthew 26:40) As we remember this privilege that Jesus gives us still today I would invite you to think about people you know who are physically or spiritually thirsty to whom giving a drink, or a helping hand, or speaking a kind word may risk the condemnation or scorn of others, or simply move us out of our own comfort zones. I would invite you to take a moment now to think and to pray for such people whom Jesus is placing in your life at this time.

(Time of Silence)

Our closing hymn will remind us that ultimately we can find that courage and strength to reach out to help other people in the name of Jesus only as we allow his love seen most clearly in his suffering on the cross that prompted him to cry out, “I am thirsty,” to fill us and to enable us to serve the neighbors we have from him. I would invite you now and throughout the rest of Lent to pray that more and more of that love that will not let us go seen in the suffering death of Jesus on the cross might fill your life and strengthen you to serve the neighbors whom Jesus is giving to you. (Time of Silence)

Prayer:

Leader:

Lord Jesus Christ, as we hear of that experience of Nicodemus we remember how easily we are filled with fear and are slow to speak up when a word from us may make all of the difference in the life of another person. As we remember the one who had the courage to respond to your cry, “I am thirsty” by giving you a drink we thank you for all who still find that courage today to respond in your name to the needs of others.

Unison:

Holy Jesus, draw me nearer to your cross. Help me to see the love so amazing and so divine that you have shown for me as you suffered and died there for me. Fill me, then, with that love that I may become the instrument of your love to serve the neighbors whom you give me at this time and in this place, for I ask these things in your name and for your sake. Amen.

Hymn page 13

“Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love”
(Refrains and stanzas 1 and 2)

Chereponi