

When the Teacher met the Rabbi

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It was well after dark when I went to see him. That was my choice. And let me say, before you even think it, it wasn't because I was scared.

You see, it was just that I didn't want to embarrass him. I know, it sounds stupid now, but as God is my witness, that's the truth.

Like everyone else, I'd heard the rumours about him. So I thought I should check him out. Find out the truth. That is – or rather was – my responsibility, to find out the truth for the Jewish nation, and to teach it.

I didn't tell Caiaphas or any of the others. Caiaphas was all for challenging him in public. He wanted to discredit him in front of his followers, by asking him tricky theological questions. But as far as I was concerned, that could come later.

Also, I went to see Jesus by night so I could talk to him man to man, alone. But when I got there, he wasn't alone; he had twelve of his followers sitting around him. I told him who I was, and I indicated that I'd prefer some privacy, but he laughed.

'Nicodemus, these are my friends, and they too need teaching. They have not had the advantage of your upbringing. So humour me, and allow them to stay. Who knows? They may learn something!'

I felt flattered. So I agreed.

I thought it only polite to flatter him in return. "Rabbi," I said, "I know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."

“Nicodemus,” he said, interrupting me before I had even got to my question, “you are a seeker after the truth. I can see that. Well the truth is this: unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

I looked at him then. He was joking. He had to be. I wanted to see it in his face, in his eyes, but the fire was casting deep shadows.

The truth is that I was disappointed. I had come ready to learn, hopeful even, and all he could come up with was this ridiculous idea.

I stood up sharply, ready to shake the dust of my feet and go, but I was too angry. “How,” I demanded, “how can a man be born again when he is old? Do I have to enter a second time into my mother’s womb and be born a second time?”

Then he stood up too, and now even in the flickering light of the fire, I could see there was a smile on his lips. “The truth is this, Nicodemus. Unless a person is born of water and the Spirit, he – or she – cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

“What do you mean?” I replied.

“Do you not understand?” he said. It was his turn to be angry now, as if I was the stupidest pupil in the class. “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand what I am saying. I speak of what I know, and I bear witness to what I have seen, and if you do not believe me ...”

He never finished his sentence. He didn’t need to. I knew he was disappointed with me.

But I had had enough. I turned to leave. One of the disciples followed me out.

“Thank you for coming,” he said in his thick Galileean accent.

I turned to look at him. His face was weathered and his beard unkempt. He must have been one of the fishermen. A simple man, out of his depth. Perhaps at least I could talk sense into him.

“You don’t believe all that, do you?” I said sharply.

He grinned. “I sure do. And so would you if you had seen what we have seen.”