

Jesus and the Pharisees are often at odds. In the Gospel of John, one Pharisee stands out as different from the rest. Nicodemus did not openly acknowledge Jesus in the synagogue, but he comes to meet him individually at night. The signs that Jesus performs are undeniable. He is definitely a man of God. Nicodemus knows there is more to Jesus than meets the eye, but he is a bit confused by the teaching of Jesus. So, he comes asking questions.

Nicodemus thinks in earthly terms. He is confused at the idea of being born again. In his literal thinking, he can't grasp how a full-grown adult is able to crawl back inside a mother to be born a second time. In defense of Nicodemus, one might argue that his literal interpretation draws an extreme conclusion in order to have Jesus more fully explain what he means.ⁱ

Jesus responds: "Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (Jn 3:5). "Jesus seeks to lead Nicodemus into a deeper understanding, to raise his natural thinking to reckon with spiritual realities. In this way, Jesus wishes to communicate a vitally important lesson for all believers: the new, eternal life that he has come to bring is a pure gift from God that totally exceeds our natural abilities."ⁱⁱ

To be born again is to be baptized. We become children of the Father, and a brother to Jesus by spiritual adoption. We may even take it another step further. In death we are born a third time. Having embraced spiritual adoption and lived a life of sacrifice for others, death brings a new birth to eternal life as Jesus welcomes us into the Kingdom.

How do we help people to grow in their faith? Nicodemus may not fully understand but he is duly impressed with the attention Jesus shows him and the new way of thinking he offers. The next time we encounter Nicodemus the guards have just reported to the chief priests and Pharisees that Jesus is seen as a prophet by some and as the Messiah by others. The crowds are being stirred up and this is of grave concern to the chief priests and Pharisees. They want to neutralize Jesus as a threat to their own power. As they are poised to attack Jesus, Nicodemus now more sure in his faith, stands up for Jesus. "Does our law condemn a person before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing?" (Jn 7:51)

By the end of the Gospel of John, Nicodemus is a staunch supporter of Jesus and no longer afraid to hide in the shadows. When Joseph of Arimathea asks for the body of Jesus for burial, "Nicodemus, the one who had first come to him at night, also came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about one hundred pounds" (Jn 19:39).

Recalling the visit of the magi, one of whom brought myrrh for the infant Jesus, the large quantity of myrrh offered by Nicodemus is a grand profession of faith. He acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God and offers a fitting gift for resurrection and a rebirth or return to eternal life. "Whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God" (Jn 3:21).

Faith is often a gradual process. We come with questions and are affirmed when someone meets us where we are at to help us understand and lead us forward. We take little steps forward and demonstrate progress as we are willing to stand up for what we believe. And when we are more mature in our faith, we are willing to be very generous with our time, talent, and treasure to help build up the Kingdom of God without fear or worry of what others think.

ⁱ Martin, Francis; Wright, William M. IV. *The Gospel of John: Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture*. Pg.71

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, Pg. 69.