

I am embarrassed to say that I don't like the dark. I find that I feel very vulnerable. Both the current rectory and my last house in Garvagh had long driveways down to the main road, and even though it made sense for me to leave the bins down during day time, 9 times out of 10 I would forget and have to walk down in the dark late at night. Even though I have a torch I find it scary in case someone is lurking behind a bush or tree. I know at 52 years of age it's stupid.

Today's story is set at night time also. Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees went to see Jesus at night time, and the gospel of John makes sure we know this, telling us here in the 3rd chapter and twice later on when we encounter him again. So why is night time so significant to the story? Well it's probably that Nicodemus, an officially recognized religious expert didn't want to be seen engaging in spiritual discussion with an unofficial, un-endorsed, controversial upstart from Galilee.

But the other issue that I think is worth consider is that Nicodemus might have been ashamed to be seen. I wonder if shame, not fear, is what led Nicodemus to seek Jesus under the safety of the darkness.

I think before I go a little further it's important for me to say that where I'm going to take this talk next might be uncomfortable for some of you here. If what I say next opens up any wounds from the past, please know that it is not my intention to do so, but what I hope is that in looking at the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, we begin to recognise the hard things in our lives that have hurt us badly may have not ever been healed, but as we bring these into the light of Jesus we find restoration and cleansing.

You see for such a person like Nicodemus to step outside the authorized circles of expertise, to share spiritual matters, would have carried a degree of embarrassment. And when Jesus started talking about being re-born, letting go of all in order to approach God like an infant, Nicodemus struggled to go there. It was a humbling moment in his life.

At some point, most of us have done shameful things: dishonest things, things completely contrary to our own moral & ethical understandings. At its best healthy shame helps me to repair those things in my life that I am ashamed of so that I am a different person into the future. It can play an important role in a well-balanced life, reminding all of us of the kind of people we truly want to be.

But most shame isn't healthy. Toxic shame – the kind of shame imposed on us from outside sources can be so destructive. When someone else intentionally sows seeds of doubt or limitation in you, trying to convince you that you are dirt, that's toxic shame. Satan will do everything in his power, as he has done with me to remind me of my past, and bring me to a place of utter shame. We know of many people who have hit the headlines due to the shameful things that they have done to others, and in some cases it is a cause for restoration, but many times the person will fade into the shadows never to be heard of again.

When someone abandons us or hurts us deeply – when someone injects toxic shame into our lives – a wound results. We seek forgiveness, but we also know that even when forgiveness is found, we need to keep ourselves safe from further harm. We know that in Christ, feeling wounded and forgiven travel closely together, but that does not lessen our sense of broken trust or our need to stay safe.

So what about Nicodemus, and this possibility of shame playing a role in his approach to Jesus in the cover of dark.

Was he embarrassed by the privilege of his own life, compared with the truth spoken by this modest man? If so, he came to the right place, hearing of God's unending love for the world.

Was Nicodemus feeling trapped by his life, and wanted to start afresh, and had no safe place to share that without being shamed, other than opening up to this outsider? If so, imagine what it was like to hear Jesus tell you that you could begin again, and it likened to being born a second time.

Did Nicodemus have a sense that the strength in Spirit shown by Jesus, could help him truly embrace that holy power in his life? If so, his ongoing allegiance later in life to Jesus, suggests that he found what he was seeking. Remember that it was Nicodemus who later would take Jesus' dead body and prepare it for burial.

When I consider Nicodemus tip-toeing through darkness toward Jesus, I think of those times in my life when I have been wrestling with shame – either the healthy kind or the toxic kind – and have wanted the safety of darkness, of either hiding it away or talking with Jesus alone and unseen. But like Nicodemus, the place I have found rest for my soul, is in the presence of Jesus, where I can speak my shame, and cry my tears, and seek new life, knowing that the receiver of that hard stuff is all loving, all gracious, my source and my freedom. The thing about Satan is that he doesn't want us to open up our shame to the light of Christ. He wants us to hide it and feel powerless to freedom. And yet the church, our church, must be a place where people feel safe to seek freedom from their past. It cannot be a place of gossip or shame.

In Nicodemus, I see just enough courage to step forward, and in Jesus, there is a welcome of that step, offering illumination in the dark of night, pouring his forgiveness and his peace onto our shame, unlocking with love anything from our past that tries to drag us down. To be honest, I have no way of knowing if Nicodemus carried shame or if that's just me just making more of the biblical story, but I do know this: his encounter with Christ released him from something that needed to be released.

In our personal lives and in our life as a church family, there will not come a time when life is free from challenges, but we live in a state of hope and promise. Our church must be a hospital for the sick where people feel that they are accepted and that they can seek freedom from all bondages of satan that would try to trap them and make them feel worthless. We know that when that which is hidden sees the light of day, when our shame and our past is exposed to the love of Jesus, new life is possible. As we walk with Nicodemus, away from whatever locks us in shame, and toward God's own care and love in Christ, may we be born each day into love and life and light. Can I encourage you that if you have any issues from your past or that you are carrying today that are not resolved, know that you can come to me and I can help you bring them to the restorative, loving, healing Jesus that Nicodemus encountered.