

Peer pressure can have a great influence on people. Parents are always concerned about the friends their kids have, concerned about the type of influence they have on them. This is especially true when our children become teenagers. One look at a group of students from Middle School through High School and even college and you can tell which group a student hangs out with by the way he or she dresses.

Even though we don't like to admit it, adults face a lot of peer pressure too. The pressure may come in the form of the way we think or dress wherever we work. If we are a member of a group, we are expected to fit in. You wouldn't expect a Supreme Court Justice to show up in a bright pink robe, would you?

Tonight's people at the cross were two men who were members of the Jewish High Council or Court of their day, members of the Sanhedrin. Joseph and Nicodemus had risen just about as high as anyone in Israel could go. They were part of the council of 70 with the duties and responsibilities of upholding the traditions and the teachings of Judaism. This was especially important since the Romans had conquered the land and brought a very powerful influence with them. The Jewish leadership was granted only a "limited" authority. Joseph and Nicodemus shared that authority with the other members of the council. It was important that they all worked together to limit the Roman threat.

But they also had to be on guard against any internal threat to the nation. A number of these threats had come up in recent years. Gamaliel, one of the leading Rabbis in Israel, said, **"Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered."** (Acts 5:35-37) Jesus was viewed as an internal threat because he attracted large crowds, was a charismatic teacher and raised the expectations of the people. Jesus did the unexpected by teaching with authority, performing miracles and challenging the religious traditions of Israel. Jesus was a threat because he didn't play by the rules. The Sanhedrin was watching him.

Nicodemus was the first member of the Sanhedrin that we know of to have a personal encounter with Jesus. The Gospel of John tells us that Nic went to see Jesus at night. We don't know if he went under the cover of darkness to avoid being seen by other members of the council, if he went at night because that was the only time he could be alone with Jesus, or even if he went at night to check out this Jesus first hand as a member of the council. What we do know is that Jesus challenged Nicodemus to rethink what he was doing and why. Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to

be born again, that his relationship with God was not about rules and rituals, but about being alive in God's love and grace. This must have had an influence on Nicodemus because he was the first to buck the peer pressure in the Sanhedrin and speak up for Jesus. At one of their meetings when the Sanhedrin members were discussing what to do with Jesus, Nicodemus asked, **"Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?"** (John 7:51)

The Gospels don't tell us much about Joseph before Jesus crucifixion. We do know that he was from Arimathea, that he had become a disciple of Jesus but tried to keep it a secret because he was afraid of the rest of the council members. He was awaiting the arrival of God's kingdom and believed that Jesus had come to usher in the new age. Beyond that, we don't have a lot of information about Joseph.

In all likelihood, neither Nicodemus nor Joseph were at the illegal night time trial held for Jesus. They may not have been notified or perhaps they refused to participate in the illegal assembly. They were not able to stop the trial or the condemnation of Jesus. But they realized that somebody had to do something. So they got permission from the Roman Governor, Pilate, to bury Jesus' body. They gave him a royal burial in a brand new tomb. They gave their Lord the respect that He deserved.

God also realized that something had to be done when everything went wrong. After people fell away from God and became slaves to sin, when mankind's priorities were wrong and people carried a burden of guilt and shame, God decided to act. He set into motion the one plan that would restore people to His family. God stepped in to intervene in our problems. He would not stay distant, removed. Jesus announced that plan to Nicodemus the night of his visit when He said, **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."** (John 3:16-17)

That is exactly what Jesus did for us on the cross, he saved us and gave us a new life. In response to God's love, we need to do something. God calls us to faith and gives us a new life. He always takes the first step. But His love calls for a response. The response is to love God and to love others as God loves us. The response is to forgive as we have been forgiven, to introduce others to Jesus, to let God's Spirit work in our lives. It is the most important something that we could ever do. Amen.