

## **Sermon for 1<sup>st</sup> March 2026, Year A, Lent 2**

### **Preached at St John's Baillieston**

#### **Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17**

### **Sermon**

This character called Nicodemus appears three times in John's gospel. His first appearance is here in chapter three. Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Passover and he is already famous and controversial enough that Nicodemus, who is one of the Jewish leaders from the Pharisee faction, has come by night to see him and talk theology. Now the Pharisees were the group that Jesus' teaching is closest to, even though he spends a lot of time criticising them for being too obsessed with religious rules at the expense of having a real heartfelt love for God or compassion for those whose lives did not look perfect from their point of view. Nevertheless, Jesus does agree with them about life after death, and about the need to live a righteous life, he simply finds that righteousness in love and compassion for one's neighbours rather than in religious purity and ceremonial perfection.

It's clear that Nicodemus is taking a huge risk by coming to see Jesus, and so he comes by night in secret. In many ways Nicodemus appears as a very modern educated sort of person. He is very rational; he can see something unexpected and attractive in Jesus, but he is nervous about getting too involved. What would his friends and neighbours and colleagues say? His status and perhaps even his income in the community depend on him not letting anyone know how he really feels. Privately he admits he sees God in everything Jesus is doing, but publicly he cannot speak out.

At first Jesus seems to respond positively. Nicodemus admits that he believes Jesus has come from God, because of the signs and miracles he is doing, and

Jesus seems to imply that since no one can see the kingdom of God unless they have been born anew, then Nicodemus must in fact be very close to being part of the kingdom himself. Nicodemus is coming to Jesus in darkness, but Jesus, standing in the light, is holding out his hand and urging Nicodemus to cross over from one side to the other.

Now, it's not clear from the Greek what Jesus actually says to Nicodemus. The words could mean born again, or born anew or afresh, or born from above. Our translation says, 'You must be born from above,' but there are whole Christian denominations that insist you have to be 'born again' to be a proper Christian, although they don't always agree with each other on what that means.

In this case, sadly, Nicodemus' intellect gets in the way. He wants to know what Jesus could possibly mean by being born a second time. He takes it literally. How can a man be born when he is old? Jesus explains that it's not about a literal birth, it's about starting afresh, and being motivated this time by the Holy Spirit and not by worldly craving and ambition – what Jesus calls 'the flesh.'

Then Jesus draws this fascinating parallel between the way the wind blows wherever it wants, and the way those motivated by the Holy Spirit cannot be constrained by human rules and selfishness and ambition. The comparison between wind and spirit is even more obvious when you know that in the Greek they're exactly the same word – '*pneuma*'.

Nicodemus still doesn't get it of course. "How can these things be?" he says, which triggers amazement in Jesus. "How are you a teacher of Israel if you don't understand these things?" Personally, I'm surprised that Jesus is surprised, but then Jesus is very young – I'm already 25 years older than Jesus at this point in his ministry and I've probably had more time to lower my expectations of religious leaders!

Nevertheless, Jesus presses on. He declares to Nicodemus who he is and why Nicodemus should put his faith in him. He declares that he has descended from heaven, and that no one else can talk about heaven except the one who came from there. And then he delivers possibly the most famous verse in the New Testament, the one that almost every Christian remembers, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” It is the cry of every Christian evangelist. Believe in Jesus and you will receive eternal life. Jesus is here not to condemn us but to offer us a completely fresh start that leads to eternal life enjoying God.

But what does it mean to be born anew and to believe in Jesus? It would be a mistake to think this is something we do purely with our minds. There’s nothing in John’s gospel to say that believing in Jesus is just about agreeing with the intellectual proposal that he’s the Son of God. Faith is always far more about what you *do* than what you *think*. Belief is about the response of the heart, not the mind.

This is why I say I truly became a Christian quite recently in 2010, not back at university in 1990 which is when I first raised my hand at an evangelistic meeting and said the ‘sinner’s prayer’ in order to accept Jesus into my life. That was a purely intellectual decision. My head said it was true, but my life didn’t really change. I didn’t really fall in love with Jesus, and I didn’t really have a relationship with God. And so, I drifted away from church.

It was fifteen years until I walked into a church again, and this time it had nothing to do with intellectual proof and everything to do with an experience of God’s love, which I experienced first from two women who invited me to the church coffee morning, and then later experienced profoundly in my own uncertain prayers. This is an entirely different kind of belief, the kind that starts our lives again in a completely different direction.

Nicodemus, it seems, is not ready for that commitment. We don't hear his immediate response to what Jesus has told him, but later, in chapter 7, we meet him briefly again as he tries to argue with the other Pharisees that they should give Jesus a hearing before they condemn him. Nicodemus is clearly still attracted to what Jesus is saying and doing, but unable to openly support him. The other Pharisees mock Nicodemus and dismiss his argument in a single sentence: "Search and you will see no prophet comes from Galilee." They are so completely driven and hemmed in by literal words of scripture that they are blind to the very kingdom of God that Jesus is bringing about. The Pharisees have based their faith on intellectual rules, but God's kingdom is rooted in loving relationships.

This is why it has always been so important for the Church to realise that when we come to the altar to receive Holy Communion, we come not as individuals but together as a community. The people alongside you at the altar rail are as important as the bread and wine you receive. The bread is the body of Christ, but, together, so are you.

We meet Nicodemus one last time in chapter 19, after Jesus has died on the Cross. Finally, Nicodemus enters the light. Along with Joseph of Arimathea, another wealthy disciple of Jesus who has been too scared to admit it in public, Nicodemus brings burial spices and helps to bury Jesus in the tomb. It is a public act of faith that cannot be hidden. It took a while, but Nicodemus finally accepts Jesus' invitation of faith and is born anew.

This is an invitation God offers to all of us, whatever our age or state of life, however long ago we felt we became a Christian believer. But it is not something we can do purely by our own efforts. It's God who gives new birth in water and the Spirit, to be nurtured in community. This rebirth and transformation are God's gifts to give, and his work to accomplish, and it is the work he never ceases to do. And he offers that gift to us, again, today.