

# THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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## Today's Bible reading

*John 3:1-21 ("Nicodemus Visits Jesus")*

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.' Amen. (NRSV)

## Today's hymns

*There's a Spirit in the air* (CH: 616)

*Do not be afraid* (CH: 191)

*From all that dwell below the skies* (CH: 146)

*Tell out, my soul* (CH: 286)

*Go in peace and make disciples* (CH: 682)

I have two questions for your consideration today. The first seems simple enough, and yet from a scientific point of view it may be a good deal more complex than first it seems. Here we go: **what does it mean to be born?** Ask any midwife and they will tell you all about the astonishing range of processes which work together in a mind-boggling way to bring a new human being into the world. There is so much that could be said, though all I need to say is that the tiny journey from womb to room is one of quite breath-taking contrasts. To be born is to enter a world innocent, vulnerable and dependent. More even, to be born is to encounter trauma ... risk ... massive uncertainty. And so to the second of my two questions for your consideration today. Again, this seems simple, yet from a theological point of view it may be a good deal more complex than first it seems. Here we go ... for a second time: **what does it mean to be born *again*?** From our reading of John's gospel chapter 3, we find this issue to be one that has Nicodemus stumped ... and with good reason. Nicodemus is a smart bloke who may well think that he has the inside track on what is going on in his world.

As a Pharisee, he is a scholar who knows his Hebrew Bible. Steeped in the traditions of Jewish Scripture he would be expected to have a keen sense of what it means to be waiting for the arrival of the chosen one of God. And in Jesus, Nicodemus finds a person to look at with both eyes wide open in the gathering gloom of night.

When the two men meet in some shadowy place, the Pharisee notes that Jesus is a teacher "from God". In response to this, Jesus doesn't offer any word of thanks for such a kind sentiment so graciously offered. No. Jesus appears to come straight to the point, making clear that there are old ways which need renewing:

*Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*

With these words Jesus gets right in amongst Nicodemus, forcing him, perhaps, to come up with a reaction. But Nicodemus only finds himself puzzled. He has a clear idea of what being born is all about, and this image of a baby entering the world is very far removed from whatever it might be that Jesus is getting at. The Pharisee is bamboozled by the very notion of "being born from above", simply because such a concept was not known across the history of the faith. And so Jesus brings confusion to their conversation, leaving a religious figure well and truly befuddled. Nicodemus is lost and doesn't know where to turn. In a meeting which famously takes place at dead of night, the Pharisee finds himself in the dark of his own incomprehension.

I wonder ... just where do *we* stand in relation to this bewildering notion of rebirth from heaven? On one level our own Christian faith (firmly grounded in Jesus and his teaching) gives us a natural understanding of what being *reborn* is all about. This piece of Christian teaching is not new to us. As human beings we are sinful. We have an inclination to turn ourselves away from God. We get things wrong. We need to be forgiven, just as we need to forgive others also. And even the most saintly - the most wonderful - of Christian people have sinned and fall short of God's great glory, again and again. But in coming to faith, in being converted, in walking the way of Jesus (you choose which of these makes most sense to you) we come to understand that *in some sense* our life has radically changed; our old environment has been replaced by a new environment, and we find ourselves embarking upon a new kind of adventure: traumatic; risky; fabulous; and necessary. It is quite a journey. Or, as the apostle Paul put it so memorably in 2 Corinthians 5:7: *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*

Look at wise and scholarly Nicodemus, there in the deepest shadows of his own unknowing. In him we see someone who is doubting his own long-held assumptions. He would have been taught well by experts in the faith, becoming a scholar of standing and renown. Yet in Jesus, he found a teacher not taught by teachers before him, but one who had “come from God”.

All in all, Nicodemus is in a place of deep uncertain. He is curious, maybe even starting to obsess about what this unlikely working man from Galilee is really all about. As another great biblical scholar, Professor Walter Brueggemann, puts it, Nicodemus most certainly felt deep inside, “a *gnaw* about reality”. The religious and spiritual certainties of the old faith were beginning to eat him up deep inside.

And all because of Jesus.

We are not unlike Nicodemus. When faced with the true implications of God’s pull on our lives we may try our best to stay well within those old familiar ways, probably because those ways are indeed both old and familiar. Yet when that inner gnawing comes, it comes for a reason. When we, against our better judgment, feel called by God to walk in a new direction, away from that which has long been received and accepted and appreciated so very deeply, we find ourselves in an uncomfortable place. Simply because of that gnawing, we find that the old and the familiar can never be enough - just as Nicodemus found long before us. We too are in the darkness of night, and we find that the darkness is not good for us.

But (this being John’s gospel) where there is darkness all around, you can be sure that God’s Light will not be terribly far away. Jesus can sense that gnawing, there in the soul of the troubled Pharisee, so Jesus brings to him a direct message of stomach-churning challenge but also of life-changing hope.

Professor Brueggemann paraphrases this well:

“You’ve got to start over! You’ve got to be reborn. You’ve got to be born again. You’ve got to be born from above. You’ve got to become as vulnerable and as innocent as a little child. You’ve got to forgo your social position, your achievements, your wealth, your reputation. You’ve got to let go of all the things that make you self-sufficient and that alienate you from the wonder and the gift of God. *Start over* in *vulnerability*, in *innocence*, and in *dependence*, for the way you are living now keeps you cut off - in your arrogant security - from all the gifts of life for which you so much yearn.”

What comes after the dialogue between Jesus and the shadowy Nicodemus is a passage of Scripture known and loved by so many Christians of so many differing traditions, straight from the mouth of Jesus himself:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

What does this sentence present to us? And what does it represent to our faith? It could so easily come across as a glib little motto, or as a tightly worded manifesto, or as a deeply meaningful statement of faith. *But what if we see it as an invitation*, held out with open arms? An invitation made in love to anxious old Nicodemus who perhaps was ready (and more than ready) to be reborn, innocent, vulnerable and dependent ... dependent upon a grace that was ready to play its heavenly part.

And so, in the company of this unsettling Christ, old selves are turned (through none of their own doing) into new selves. Fresh worlds dawn before us, undreamt of opportunity beckons. And we (both individually and as a church) are transformed by the very grace of God. Amen.

## Praying for others

God of love and light,  
reach out and draw us in, out of our darkness.

We come to you worried, perplexed, appalled at the suffering in the world today,  
as the horror of man's inhumanity to man engulfs us.

We are unsure how to respond, feeling powerless, weak, helpless, distant, afraid.

Give us courage to put ourselves in the shoes of others and to feel their pain.

Empower us to take action, forsaking our own comfort and security  
to open our country, our churches, our homes, our hearts,  
to welcome those exiled, oppressed, wounded, bereft,  
in whose eyes, despite their suffering, we see your Light.

May we humbly believe in the power of prayer, personal and collective,  
as we pray with all our hearts for peace, for the healing of divisions,  
for the reversal of roles - justice over tyranny, food over famine, water over thirst,  
safety over terror, light over darkness.

We come to you through Jesus Christ your Son  
who, like you, gave his all for us. Amen.

## And finally ...

*Robin Hill considers hospitality in a pretty big way:*

The obscenity witnessed by the world in Russia's invasion of Ukraine is troubling on a great many levels, not least the scale of the humanitarian disaster facing Europe's second largest sovereign State. With a wave of humanity heading westwards, we are being brought face to face with what it means to be human.

In recent days people have been asking what can be done. Indeed, some are asking me what the Church can do. And that means us.

Chatting with a Roman Catholic priest, I was struck by the way in which he is already identifying disused properties (the equivalent of vacant manses, in our way of thinking) which could quickly be turned around and put to good use.

Then came the news from the Church of Scotland Offices that discussions are under way with the Scottish Government over our response. The Principal Clerk noted that refugee housing is an important issue which is being given attention.

All this is good and only to be expected, yet the point at which hospitality becomes meaningful - becomes real - is when doors of homes are thrown open for hospitality, with new friendships being forged. We can reach into our pockets to draw out cash, but we also need - home by home, family by family - to reach into our hearts and share the rich resource of love which is God's gift to each one.

That's a huge challenge to my familiar home domain of cosy comfort ... and, most likely, it is to yours too. So what are we to do? Sit back to dream up our sensible and well-reasoned excuses for hands-off inaction? Or lean forward to plan new ways of welcoming those who need us most right now?

Are we ready to put our love to the test when it truly counts?