



## **Worship at Home—30 May 2021**

### **Professor John Sawkins**

#### **Call to Worship**

Our call to worship is taken from Psalm 29,

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,  
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.  
Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name;  
worship the Lord in holy splendour.  
The voice of the Lord is over the waters;  
the God of glory thunders,  
the Lord, over mighty waters.  
The voice of the Lord is powerful;  
the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.

...

The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;  
the Lord sits enthroned as king for ever.  
May the Lord give strength to his people!  
May the Lord bless his people with peace!

Let us worship God.

#### **Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer—Isobel Webber**

Loving Father, these moments are precious as we come before you today—set apart from all that we have to do in our lives, a haven where we can seek together the grace you freely give. The peace of Jesus your Son, and unity amongst each other, to draw near as brothers and sisters in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Father, as You bring light into darkness and hope to our world, your son Jesus brings comfort to those suffering.

As the Holy Spirit brings joy to our hearts and everyday miracles of change in our world. We come to worship You and to offer our praise.

As we look towards a life where we can live more openly as restrictions ease from the pandemic, we offer our gratitude for the strength You have given us to persevere through all the hardships of the past year, and praise You for the prospect of new beginnings.

We thank You, Father, that You come to us now in our lives as we look ahead once more, in worship, You speak to us, in our journey through life. In our journey through life, You go with us.

When our lives are troubled, You will be there for us, your promises will remain, you will hold us fast, Your son Jesus will give us the strength, peace and comfort to go on, for Your love which holds us forever, we praise You Father.

We are but sometime sinners and ragged saints, help us to be renewed and refreshed once more, to rejoice again in You, to live every day as a step forward, living our lives always in Your light, and to spark that light to shine again in church and nation.

We offer You these prayers in the name of Jesus, our saviour who lived and died for us, and who taught us to pray ...

Our Father, who art in heaven; hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.  
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever.  
Amen

### Scripture Reading: John 3: v 1-17

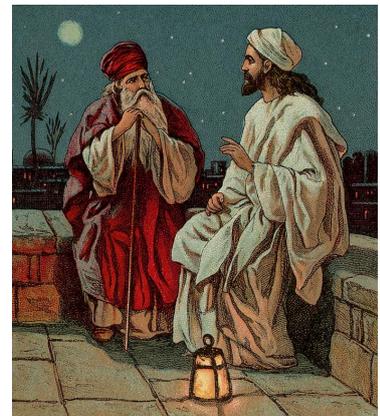
#### Nicodemus Visits Jesus

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.



# Meditation

## Jesus and Nicodemus

From the Gospel of John, chapter 3 and verse 1:

*“Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night.”*

### Introduction

“Remember, remember the 5<sup>th</sup> of November, gunpowder, treason and plot.”

However if, like me, you were brought up in the East Riding of Yorkshire you would be better advised to remember the night before bonfire night, the 4<sup>th</sup> November, known locally as ‘Mischief Night’.

Mischief night was, and is, an occasion—or an excuse—for some people to engage in what I guess you would describe as low level anti-social behaviour. Emptying bins, covering cars in eggs and flour, and a prank that happened with depressing frequency where I lived, gates being lifted off their hinges and carried down to the end of the road.

I recall one particular Mischief Night when the perpetrators of that little trick were caught in the act of removing some gates by my father. He then explained to them, in a pretty direct way I think, that there would be a lot more mischief if the gates were not put back. They were returned intact and not touched again.

So hide your bins, put away your car and hold onto your gates are the rules to follow on Mischief Night.

Lots of things, not all of them good, happen under cover of darkness, at night.

### Gospel Reading

And so to our gospel reading. Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Passover when he receives a visit, at night, by a Pharisee called Nicodemus.

A night-time visit in the Gospel of John is unlikely to be a good thing. One of the great contrasts in this Gospel is light versus dark, day versus night. Night is the time for hiding things. For activities that might not stand the light of day. The fact that the night-time visitor is a Pharisee only makes matters worse.

Remember that Pharisees were, by and large, members of the well-read, educated, middle-class. In today’s terms they would rub shoulders with teachers, lawyers, civil servants—we might be surprised at how much we had in common with them. And they were not all reactionary stick-in-the-muds. Some were keen to update the intricate legal code, on all manner of things from tithing, to what you should or should not do on the Sabbath.

And of course they have a bad press in the Gospels. As a group they were naturally suspicious of Jesus, and at different points sought to undermine his work. And so, when Jesus receives a visit from a Pharisee, and at night, we have the distinct feeling—this isn’t going to end well.

So it comes as a bit of a surprise that the first words out of Nicodemus’ mouth are not confrontational,

*“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”*

Those aren't the words of someone looking for a fight. Nor does it seem that Nicodemus is out to trick Jesus, as some of his compatriots might.

So the exchange picks up with Jesus, quite sharply saying, "I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Or some versions have "born from above."

And that hooks Nicodemus in, prompting him to ask, "How can a man be born when he is old? ... Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born?"

Now, some commentators take that response to mean that Nicodemus was a bit dim and was struggling to pick up on the image that Jesus was using. I don't think he was dim. And I don't think he was a naïve fool either. He was a mature, educated man in a position of authority. A proud Jew with a keen mind—a teacher's mind. And what teacher hasn't picked a striking image—like birth—and deployed it in trying to get a point across? Nicodemus picked all that up and was willing to go with it, and to listen to the answers he got in order to try and work out for himself whether the reports he had heard of this man Jesus, were truth, or hype, or lies.

And no, he wasn't a fool. He wasn't naïve enough to risk his position and reputation by going about it in a way that others would notice. Only a fool in his position would have been seen going to meet Jesus during the day. He went at night—under the radar.

Born again. Born of the spirit. That implies a new start. Not just a change of direction in life—but a new life quite unlike anything that had been experienced before.

And you can almost see the cogs in his mind turning this all over and making him feel uncomfortable. Why? Part of the reason is that Nicodemus, like many of us, thought he had all this stuff, this religion, neatly organised in his mind and in his life. He thought, like we do, that he understood the channels through which God worked, and those through which he didn't work. He thought, like us, that he would see the activity of God displayed in the actions of some people and not others. He thought, like us, that God was to be found in this place and not that.

I'm reminded of the last couple of lines of the poem *Invictus* [William Ernest Henley] – they might have been written for Nicodemus,

"I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul,"

And yet ... there was something about this man Jesus that intrigued him. There was something niggling away at him—the reports he had heard. He seemed to be the real thing. He had to find a way of finding out about him first hand. So he went to see and talk to him.

And how surprising it all was.

Why the new birth? Why the new start? Why the new thought, when we have the law, the legal code, the thousand years of worship. It's all so left-field, outside his frame of reference.

Listen to the wind Nicodemus and take a lesson from it. "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Forget your religious certainties, open yourself to the possibility that God is not confined to working in ways that you prescribe and understand. Open yourself up to the idea that God wants to work through you.

Listen to the wind. You know it's real. You can see what it does. But you have absolutely no idea where it comes from and where it goes. And that's true of God's Spirit.

And God's Spirit is calling you Nicodemus to life in a whole new dimension.

A baby in the womb, warm, fed, in the dark but with senses keen and a mind being formed cannot imagine, cannot conceive of life outside that place. Life and the experience of life, is just of a quite different order.

That is the extent of the change needed in everyone's life says Jesus to Nicodemus. Not a change in direction, not a new set of objectives. No! A new birth. A birth into a life—into a world—that you cannot possibly imagine now. But a world full of wonder and potential and love.

You must be born again.

So Nicodemus leaves with all this new information rattling around in his head, to process it all and to think. To think about how what he has just heard, might change his life. And what the cost of that might be if he took the plunge and became a disciple of Jesus Christ.

### **Shall I become a disciple of Jesus Christ?**

And that, I want to suggest, is the nub of the reading for us.

Shall I become a disciple of Jesus Christ?

That question is, I suppose, one that all of us have at some point in our lives thought through.

And for some the question has been settled, and they are working out how best to live that out.

But for others, I guess the question is still open.

Shall I take the plunge? Shall I become a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Why is our answer important from an individual, personal point of view?

Putting aside the spiritual dimension to it, it is important because the answer to it will have an impact on every part of our lives.

It will determine the way in which we live: the work we do, the people we mix with, the choices we make, the way in which we spend our money, our attitudes to other people—no part of our lives is left untouched by this decision.

And here is what the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, had to say about it in his Lambeth Lecture in March 2015.

*"The best decision anyone can ever make, at any point in life, in any circumstances, whoever they are, wherever they are, whatever they are, is to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. There is no better decision for a human being in this life, any human being."*

And of course he would say that wouldn't he? But do we buy it? At one level, of course we do. And people around the world for thousands of years have staked their lives making that choice. And I use that phrase—staking their lives—with some care. Because that is what some people do when they decide to follow Christ.

Is it true that this is the best decision anyone can ever make ... whoever they are? Or let me be more specific, whatever faith they are?

Five years ago I attended the Scottish Bible Society's AGM where the guest speaker was a Dr Michael Bassous, Chief Executive of the Bible Society in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. He explained both the work of the Bible Society in the region, but also the process by which Christians were being forced out of the region. And in areas taken over by extremist groups, Christians are given a choice—covert, pay a levy and suffer confiscation of your wealth, or be killed.

His words were calm and measured. His description of the position was in complete accord with all that we see on TV and read in press reports. But what I had not heard about of course was the work of the Bible Society in the refugee camps. And what happened to the people who had picked up copies of the Gospels of Luke and John and had read them and had spoken to Bible Society staff confessing that they wanted to become disciples of Jesus Christ but they faced a huge dilemma—the cost.

The cost to them was of a totally different order to the cost we face in deciding to follow Christ. Potentially it meant total ostracism by family and friends. The breaking of social bonds. The closing down of employment opportunities. The severing of cultural ties that gave them their whole identity. Conceivably it placed the lives of themselves their wives, husbands, children, indeed the whole family circle at risk.

So, they confessed to the Bible Society workers they were disciples of Jesus, but disciples in their hearts, until the time came when they could show to the outside world it was Christ they served.

### **Response of Nicodemus**

And that, I think, was Nicodemus. A disciple of Jesus, in his heart, until the time came when he could show to the outside world it was Christ he served.

For Nicodemus the cost was equally great. The breaking of social bonds, loss of family and friends, expulsion from the ruling council, loss of position in society and work and the severing of cultural and social ties. So he was a disciple in his heart until .....?

Until the next time we read of him in the Gospel. He spoke up for Christ amongst his professional circle, when he reminded his peers in the Sanhedrin—when Jesus was brought before them—that the law required a person be heard before being judged.

And until the third and final time we read of him in the Gospel. Until he very publicly identified himself with Christ, when after the crucifixion he assisted Joseph of Arimathea to prepare the body of Jesus to be laid in the grave.

First a finding out about Jesus—hoping no one else would see.

Second a speaking out for Jesus in his professional and social circle.

Third identifying himself publicly as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

### **Our Response**

Do we see ourselves in these encounters between Nicodemus and Christ?

Do we come to church, tune in to YouTube, wanting to find out more—under the radar—just by ourselves—hoping others won't notice—by night? Are we disciples in our hearts?

And do we recognise that God's Spirit works in ways and through people however unexpected and unlikely. And do we remain open to the possibility that his Spirit can work in us? And do we understand the need, not just to change the direction of our lives, but to step into a new life which in its love is beyond all we can wish and hope for?

Then do we then find ourselves speaking up for Christ in our place of work, our social circle and our home?

Then do we break cover in the wider world, to identify with him, knowing that the world is looking and watching and waiting to scoff.

Nicodemus recedes into the background, but Jesus continues to speak to us.

Let us choose today for the first or the tenth, or the hundredth time to follow him.

Because if we do we will be born again into the life of faith and hope and love, which has no limit and no end.

Amen

## **Prayers of Intercession—Jim Webber**

Father we are a world that is desperate for You.

When powers struggle for dominance,  
and war, oppression and abuse result;  
When groups of people oppose one another  
because of ideology, religion or culture;  
We need a God who is bigger than ourselves,  
and our personal interests.

When people are disregarded and devalued  
because of poverty, geography or disease;  
When compassion and justice is withheld to some  
because of sexuality, race or gender;  
We need a Saviour who is more compassionate than we are  
who includes even those we would exclude.

When resources are mismanaged and abused,  
and the world and its creatures are destroyed;  
When motivation is scarce and creativity is in short supply  
to address the challenges that we face;  
We need a Spirit who is more powerful and more creative  
than we could ever be.

Father in a moment of silence we bring before You anyone known to us who is troubled in any way and needs your loving love and strength

Silence ....

Father, Loving Saviour, Empowering Spirit,  
we offer You these prayers  
because we need You so desperately.  
Captive us, call us and fill us,  
that we may be carriers of Your eternal life  
to this world that You love so dearly. Amen.

## Benediction

And now may the peace of God,  
Which passes all understanding  
Keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God  
And of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

And may the blessing of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us, and remain with us, now and  
always.

Amen

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All names were drawn last week by the Session Clerk and the  
name out of the hat was one suggested by Betty Clark.

Meet Harry the heron.

## Trinity Sunday

These resources are designed to help you explore the Bible as a family together at home while we can't go to church. Be as creative as you want to be and enjoy spending time with each other and with God.

### Prepare yourself...

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
we praise you for the might and mystery  
of your being.  
We come today in awe of who you are.  
We wonder that you love each one of us.  
We wonder that God gave His son to save  
us, that Jesus chose to die in our place,  
that the Holy Spirit lives within us.  
Help us to worship you with our whole  
being.  
Amen.



### Question...



If you could ask God one question, what would  
it be?

### Read the Bible...

Today's verses are found in John 3:1-17. You can read them in a Bible or find them here.

Here's a video of today's story: Nicodemus—[Sharefaith kids](#)

This is another version of the story you may want to read together: [https://  
www.rootsontheweb.com/media/22622/trinity-present-the-reading.pdf](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/media/22622/trinity-present-the-reading.pdf)



## Talk together...



- \* When you think of 'God', 'Jesus', and 'Holy Spirit', what images or words come to mind?
- \* The Pharisees were people who tried to keep every part of the Jewish law very strictly. They thought that was the way they would be allowed into heaven. What does Jesus say about that? (look at verse 15-17 for clues!)
- \* Why do you think Nicodemus came to Jesus at night? What might he have been afraid of happening?
- \* Nicodemus says that he knows Jesus was sent by God because of the miracles he was doing. Can you think of any miracles Jesus did?
- \* How do you feel when you experience something you can't easily explain?
- \* What does being a 'child of God' mean to/for you?

## Pray together...

Nicodemus wanted to understand completely, but God is so big that we can never fully understand who He is. There will always be some parts that remain a mystery to us. But just because God is so big, doesn't mean that He is far from us. Quite the opposite is true! God is with us all the time and wants us to be close to Him. Pray together:

Wonderful God, help us to keep adventuring with you.  
May we allow ourselves to be filled with visions of your awesomeness,  
and may we know your presence closer to us than our own breathing.  
Thank you for creating us, for being visible to us in Jesus,  
and for inspiring and empowering us with your interweaving Spirit.  
Amen

## Play together...

Mystery objects: You'll need bags/boxes with a hole (eg tissue box), a range of objects with various textures and shapes eg cotton wool, a sponge, jelly, flour, wet tea bags.

Put one of the items into a box and ask everyone to put their hand inside and guess what the object is without looking.

How does it feel to interact with something you can't see? Exciting? Scary?

How do you feel once you've identified the object?

How might we experience God without being able to see Him?

## Praise together...



- Sing to the tune: The Bear Necessities

Let's sing of God the Father now,  
and Jesus Christ his only Son,  
who aids you in your worries and your strife  
(A-men!).

And here's the Holy Spirit, that force that  
helps you rest and pray,  
in all the bare necessities of life.

Trinity song

King of Kings

Holy holy holy

