

03.01 Christ Church Vienna

Genesis 12.1-4; Psalm 121; Romans 4.1-5,13-17; **John 3.1-17**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight oh lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Dear Friends,

There is something deeply human in the way Nicodemus approaches Jesus. He comes by night. Not because he is insincere, but because he is cautious. He is a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, a teacher of Israel. He has standing, formation, theological responsibility. He cannot afford to be naïve. And yet he cannot ignore what he has seen.

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God.”

It is a careful confession. Respectful. Measured. He comes with what he knows.

And Jesus answers him by speaking about what he does not yet know.

In the Gospel according to John, night is never just darkness outside; it is also the twilight of understanding. Nicodemus is not hostile. He is searching. But he is still thinking within the categories he has mastered.

Jesus unsettles those categories immediately: “Unless one is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Notice: Jesus does not begin with ethics. He does not begin with institutional reform. He does not even begin with doctrine in the abstract. He begins with being.

Born from above.

For a serious religious man, that is almost offensive. Nicodemus has already given his life to the Law, to study, to discipline. What more could be required?

Everything, says Jesus.

Not because what he has done is worthless, but because it cannot generate the life of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is not the product of religious effort. It is gift. It is origin from God.

Nicodemus hears only impossibility: “How can a man be born when he is old?” He hears biology. Jesus speaks of ontology. He hears repetition. Jesus speaks of new creation.

There is something humbling here. We would often prefer guidance to rebirth. Guidance allows us to remain in control. Rebirth does not. To be born from above means that the decisive movement comes from God. We receive before we achieve.

But why such radical language? Why not simply call people to behave better?

Because the problem is deeper than behaviour.

Later in the passage Jesus says, “Light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light.” That is a grave diagnosis. It suggests not mere ignorance but misdirected love. We cling to what hides us.

And sin, in this light, is not simply an isolated misdeed. It is a distortion of communion.

From the beginning of Scripture, sin is never contained. When trust toward God is broken, trust between human beings fractures. Blame replaces gratitude. Violence follows. The wound spreads outward.

We often treat sin as if it were a private contract between the individual and God. But we do not live as isolated selves. We are bound to one another in ways both visible and hidden. A father’s bitterness shapes a household. A leader’s pride distorts an institution. A community’s indifference to injustice becomes structural.

Even our silent compromises contribute to the moral atmosphere others breathe.

This is why the language of new birth is not exaggerated. If sin touches the roots of our shared life, then adjustment at the surface will not suffice. We need renewal that reaches deeper than habit, deeper than custom, deeper even than conscious choice.

In the middle of this nighttime conversation, Jesus reaches back to Israel's wilderness: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up."

He speaks of the Cross.

There, human sin becomes unmistakable. Fear, envy, political calculation, religious anxiety—all converge. The community's disorder crystallizes around him. Yet the lifting up is not only exposure; it is revelation.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."

The world—not an idealised remnant, not the already righteous, but the world as it is: conflicted, compromised, divided.

And then this line, which we know so well that we risk not hearing it: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

Judgment is real; the light reveals what is there. But condemnation is not God's final word. Salvation is.

That matters profoundly when we speak of sin as something that affects the whole community. If our failures were merely private, perhaps private remorse would be enough. But because sin fractures communion, salvation must also restore communion.

To be born from above is not to withdraw into spiritual individualism. It is to be drawn into a new humanity shaped by Christ's self-giving love. A forgiven person becomes capable of forgiving. One who has stood in the light without being destroyed can learn to live truthfully before others.

Nicodemus does not resolve everything in this chapter. He leaves still processing. But later in the Gospel he speaks, cautiously, in Jesus' defense. And at the end, he steps into public view to honour the crucified Lord. The man who began in the night does not remain there.

That is consoling. Faith often matures quietly. Understanding deepens slowly. What begins in hesitation can grow into courage.

Perhaps we recognise something of ourselves in Nicodemus. Serious about faith. Committed to thought. Responsible within the Church. And yet aware that knowledge and structure alone cannot produce the life we long for.

Christ does not shame Nicodemus for coming at night. He meets him there. But he does not leave him there. He speaks of wind and Spirit, of lifting up, of love stronger than judgment.

The invitation remains the same. To allow ourselves to be addressed not merely at the level of opinion or behaviour, but at the level of being. To admit that we cannot heal the fractures of our common life by willpower alone. To look, as Israel once looked to the lifted sign in the wilderness, to the One lifted up for us.

And to trust that the God who loved the world enough to give his Son intends not its humiliation, but its restoration.