

Sermon on Sunday 1 March 2026

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Psalm 121 & John 3. 1-9

Nicodemus; Fence-sitter or Undercover Believer?

I remember the first time my son, Elijah, said, 'Dad, you're famous'. Before I could get too excited, he added, 'among toddlers and old people'!

I'll take that. Now, celebrity, as you'll know, comes at a price. You can never quite be anonymous, never blend into the crowd, especially when you're 6ft 4!

A few months ago, a random series of events meant that I ended up one evening in Hertford's premier and only late-night club venue, Jungle Bar. Many of you are regulars, of course, but I hadn't been to such an establishment since my late teens, and so to say that I felt like a fish out of water is an understatement. Let's just say I was definitely one of the older clientele. It was dark, unbelievably loud and most people were dancing and/or drunk. So, I thought, 'I might just get away with not being spotted'. But alas, spotted I was. I can still see the look of shock on those surprised faces.

We can speculate as to why our man Nicodemus came to meet Jesus under the cover of darkness. He was a well-known member

of the religious ruling class, the Pharisees, who weren't exactly fans of Jesus. So, it's possible he didn't want to be spotted. Maybe he was concerned about his reputation. What we do know is that he was intrigued by Jesus; convinced, in fact, that he was a teacher from God.

Nicodemus was from a pretty conservative, intellectual and performance-based religious background, and understandably, he's thrown by Jesus' talk of this wind-like Spirit and being 'born again'; he takes that bit literally.

But what did Jesus mean by those curious words, 'You must be born again'? When we hear the words 'born-again Christian', we tend to think of a particular brand or style of ultra committed Christianity. It can be used divisively as shorthand for a *real* Christian. And that's a shame, because Jesus here seems to be talking about something we all need to experience, whether that's a blinding light like Saul on the road to Damascus, or a slow burn like Nicodemus. Jesus is talking about a complete spiritual reboot or rebirth, not just a modification or update on the old life.

And if it's a rebirth, then something of the past has to die.

Jesus seems to be saying, 'Nicodemus, you have to unlearn all that religious stuff about earning God's approval. You have to surrender all that intellectual stuff where you need airtight



answers. You have to begin again, open your eyes to a whole new world of seeing.' 'Lift your eyes up', as the Psalm says.

Knowledge and right-living isn't enough. A whole new spiritual rebirth is required.

Nicodemus has been called the 'Longest Fence-Sitter' in the Gospels, with some saying that although he admired Jesus, he struggled to abandon his status as a Pharisee and member of the ruling Sanhedrin. Others think that he stayed in that institution in order to influence it and protect Jesus. He's a model, in other words, of an undercover believer.

Later, his was the soul voice that spoke up for Jesus when that council was plotting his death. And by the time of Jesus' actual death, he'd moved from fearful night-visitor to fearless disciple as he bought and brought the costly spices used for Jesus' burial. It's a move from a traditional inherited faith to something more personal and transformational.

I've got a lot of time for Nicodemus. In recent days, I've been gutted by the decision of our own bishops to throw into the long grass any progression towards true equality for LGBTQ+ people. Some people I know have chosen to leave this institution we call the C of E, but I've chosen, like Nicodemus perhaps, to stay and do what I can from within.

And I think it's fine to be hesitant about faith. I think it's OK to move slowly and allow the wind-like Spirit to let things unfold. God loves a patient trier. He's interested in steady growth rather than instant certainty, because faith isn't certainty, it's a trust built and wrestled with over time.

Faith is an alive evolving dynamic thing. If it isn't, then it calcifies. It's a movement from self-reliance to God-reliance, from inherited and institutional belief, to a personal and progressive faith. It's an invitation to come to God in the dark of unknowing, to embrace mystery in that place where human knowing runs out.

Like much new life, faith often starts in the dark, like seeds germinating, waiting for their Spring.

But it's not supposed to remain in the dark. Faith is intensely personal, yes, but it's not private. If faith doesn't impact the world, doesn't speak truth to power, doesn't work for a more just society, then what good is it? We, like Nicodemus, are called to be courageous; to stand up for the weak and the victimised. We, like Nicodemus, are called to bring the spice of our compassion to help tend the wounds of the world.

Jesus spoke about the wind-like Spirit of God. This Spirit is wild and free and alive in all living things. It is not the preserve of any religion. It is so much bigger. And we are invited to join in with

that work of transforming the world, beginning with the transformation of ourselves.