

Sermon for Sunday 1 March 2026 – The Second Sunday of Lent

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

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

We are now almost two weeks into Lent, a season when Christians are invited to reflect more deeply on our relationship with God as we journey toward the cross and the hope of Easter. But Lent is not simply a time of solemnity or tradition. It is a time of renewal. It is an invitation to examine our lives honestly before God and to allow the Holy Spirit to refresh our faith. There is a well-known saying, 'If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got'. It has been attributed to several figures, Albert Einstein, Henry Ford, or even Mark Twain. But regardless of who said it, the truth behind it is clear. In many church settings, there's often a quiet resistance to change. We cherish what is familiar. We value inherited patterns of worship, belief, and practice. And rightly so, the tradition can be a vessel of wisdom. Yet it can be difficult for us to hear that without growth and renewal, we are at risk of decline. A church that never renews itself eventually can become outmoded. A faith that never deepens can slowly fade.

Over centuries, Christianity has learned, sometimes painfully, to grow, adapt, and find new ways of expressing the unchanging gospel with a changing culture. The message remains the same, but its presentation must be living and fresh. Lent gives us precisely this opportunity to re-energise our faith, to examine our lives, and sometimes to accept new challenges from God. Faith and challenge lie at the heart of today's readings, Both in Genesis and John, it shows us that faith is never static. Faith must be renewed, reawakened, and relived in every generation. And that is the challenge before us, how we renew, re-present, and embody the gospel afresh in our time.

In our gospel reading, Jesus is in Jerusalem. When he receives an unexpected visitor, Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, highly educated, deeply religious, and widely respected. He knows the scriptures, interprets the law and belongs to the ruling Jewish Council. His vocation is to guide others in faithfulness to God. By every visible measure, Nicodemus is already a man of faith. So why does he come to Jesus? And why at night, under the cover of darkness? He is cautious. He fears being seen. The religious authorities are already uneasy about Jesus, whose teaching, miracles and claims about his relationship with God are drawing intense attention. Association with him carries a risk. Nicodemus comes privately, quietly, even

anxiously. He wants to find out for himself. And those around Jesus who would have recognised Nicodemus might well have wondered, is this man sincere or is he a spy, a sceptic, a dangerous opponent?

Yet something deeper happens in this encounter. Nicodemus listens and is both puzzled and profoundly moved. His understanding of God begins to stretch beyond the boundaries he has always known. Jesus speaks to him about being born again, or more accurately, born from above. Not physical birth, but spiritual birth. A birth of water and the spirit. This language is deeply rooted in scripture. Throughout the Bible, water and spirit together signify God's transforming work. In baptism, believers are united with Christ in a new life, as stated in Romans. In Ezekiel prophecy, God's promise, cleansing a new heart; 'I will sprinkle clean water on you, and I will put my spirit within you.' And Paul speaks renewal in Titus, 'By the Holy Spirit.' Together, these images describe one unified transformation. God cleanses with water, God renews with the Spirit, and a new life begins.

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that faith is not merely inherited identity, theological knowledge or religious status. It requires a radical inner transformation, a new way of seeing, a new heart, a new life opened to the Holy Spirit. Within this rebirth, Jesus says, 'We cannot see or enter the Kingdom of God'. For a man who believed he already understood faith, this is startling. Nicodemus had devoted his life to God. He knew scripture intimately. He belonged to the most devout circle of his society. And yet Jesus tells him, something more is needed, not more information, but transformation.

And this remains true for us. However much theological study we may have done, however long we have belonged to a denomination or a church tradition, faith is never complete. Renewal is not a one-time event, but a lifelong journey. Renewing and re-presenting the gospel in every generation begins here, recognising that we ourselves must continually be renewed. Faith cannot live on memory alone. We cannot simply dream of how things once were. Living faith always moves forward under the Spirit's guidance.

Nicodemus must also have been astonished when Jesus spoke of himself as the Son of God and revealed the depth of God's love. People often ask, how we know that God generally loves us in a world marked by suffering, injustice, and illness? Jesus answers with words that have echoed through the centuries. '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.' Notice the word 'gave'. God did not. When he did not really send his son, he gave him into human hands, into misunderstanding, into suffering and injustice, into death on the cross. And this is how we know God's love. The cross reveals the heart of God for people like us.

And John emphasises something even more striking. God loves the world, not a perfect world, but a broken and resistant one, not merely the faithful, but also the indifferent and hostile. God gives his son not only to the good, but to the lost. And that means God's love is directed towards every one of us, as we are, not as we should be. This is the gospel renewed in every generation. God's initiative proceeds our worthiness. Grace comes before achievement. Love comes before reform.

This same trusting faith appears in our Old Testament reading. God calls Abraham to leave everything familiar and go where God leads. He does not know the destination, only the promise. His journey is not flawless. He fought his doubts and struggles, and yet God establishes a covenant with him because he trusts and obeys. And Paul later echoes this in Romans. Abraham's righteousness comes not from achievement, but from faith, trust in God's promise. Faith has always meant stepping into the unknown and trusting the God who calls.

Nicodemus's story, too, shows faith in motion. His faith does not remain static after his meeting with Jesus in Chapter 3 that we've heard read. John's Gospel gives us a glimpse of his continual journey. The story of Nicodemus is only written in the Gospel of John. And John says in Chapter 7 how Nicodemus cautiously defended Jesus before his own counsel. And also in Chapter 19, his public devotion in assisting with Jesus's burial. These moments trace a clear progression from private curiosity to tentative advocacy to costly discipleship. Nicodemus begins in fear and uncertainty. He ends in courage and love. His story illustrates how faith grows over time through encounter, reflection, and response. Renewal is not instant. It unfolds. Abraham and Nicodemus, centuries apart, share this truth. Faith involves movement. Faith involves trust beyond certainty. Faith involves responding to God's call, even when the future is unclear.

So what are we aiming for as people of faith? Not merely survival after death, not simply religious respectability, not only comfort or moral improvement. God promises something far greater, the renewal of creation itself, a world restored, healed, and filled with Shalom, God's peace. In that kingdom, pain and suffering are ended. Hearts are made new. People live in love. Humanity and God are united forever. Eternal life in scripture is not only future, it begins now, the moment we believe and are transformed. The life of the coming age begins with us through the Spirit.

And this is why rebirth matters. The gospel is not merely information about heaven, it is participation in new creation. Here lies our Lenten challenge. Nicodemus had to rediscover faith beyond tradition. Abraham had to trust beyond certainty. And we, too, must renew faith in our own generation. The gospel itself never changes, but every generation must hear it anew in language and experience it can grasp. The question of our world are not so different from those

Nicodemus asked. Is God real? Does God care? Is there hope? Is transformation possible? And the Church must answer again, not only with words, but with lives transformed by the love revealed in Christ. Renewing the gospel does not mean altering its truth. It means embodying it afresh. It means allowing the Spirit to speak through new contexts, new cultures, and new challenges. It may mean new forms of worship, new ways of serving communities, new expression of compassion and justice, new language that connects ancient truth to modern experience.

But at its heart, renewal always returns to the same centre, the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus, God's Kingdom is open to all, not just the morally perfect, for none are perfect. God has taken the initiative. The cross was no accident. It was the outpouring of divine love. In Jesus, we see the full display of God's heart through his life, death, and resurrection. God's new creation has begun, and we are invited into it. We cannot live this life by our own strength. We are given the Holy Spirit to sustain and transform us. And when faith feels difficult or uncertain, we remember the words Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, 'God so loved the world'. And if we truly trust that love, we will be moved to live by it and to share it afresh in our time, in our generation, in our communities.

For the gospel must always be renewed in living hearts. It must always be re-presented by living lives. And as we journey through Lent towards Easter, may God renew our faith, deepen our trust, and empower us to bear the timeless gospel into the changing world with courage, humility, and love. Amen.