

St James' Church, Weybridge

Lent 2, Sunday 1st March 2026

Today's Readings

First Reading Genesis 12:1-4a

God tells Abram to set out on a journey where he will receive blessings and bless others.

Gospel John 3:1-17

Nicodemus visits Jesus, who responds with words about Nicodemus' need to be born from above, of water and the Spirit. Jesus also declares that God's ultimate aim is not to condemn but to bring life.

HOMILY *"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."* (John 3:16)

Recently a friend described their faith as being observational, like they are looking in but not involved. I found that perspective challenging, because as a Christian we believe that Jesus is the living embodiment of God, the creator, who longs for us to participate fully in his loving plan for humanity. What is your perspective of faith, and how do you view God's invitation for you to participate, not simply observe?

This Lent we are studying together Archbishop Stephen Cottrell's Lent Book entitled, *The Nail*, in which key witnesses describe Christ's crucifixion from their point of view. What do they perceive? How much do they participate? Looking at the crucifixion of Jesus, like any biblical text should engage us in questions, from context to politics and theology. Today's Gospel according to John is full of theological meaning, as he literally shines the light of faith into the darkness - Jesus a gift to enlighten the nations, who is all about light overcoming darkness, faith over belief and hope in the face of human failure.

Today's Gospel character is Nicodemus, who we are told came to Jesus "by night" - what does that phrase, by night mean? Did he visit when it was dark, when traditionally Hebrew scholars studied late into the evening? Remember, Jesus was a busy teacher, so perhaps meeting at night was the only available timeslot? But given how important light is to John's Gospel and his theological narrative, "by night" could be understood to mean much more than after dark. Perhaps Nicodemus was scared that his colleagues would see him with Jesus, therefore a meeting after dark was for his, or even the Lord's protection. In John 7:51, he speaks up when the Pharisees try to find fault with the Lord, and later after our Jesus death upon the cross, Nicodemus assists Joseph of Arimathea in providing our Lord with a proper burial (John 19:38,39). Joseph is described as a 'secret' disciple, because he was afraid of the Jews – could this be what "by night" really means? Was he afraid, perhaps hiding his faith in Jesus – darkness a metaphor for his unbelief or fear?

Often, we find in scripture the use of the term 'night' to indicate spiritual blindness or personal darkness. So 'night' in this passage may suggest something of Nicodemus' own spiritual darkness, though his esteem for Jesus suggests a degree of enlightenment. But for Jesus a degree of enlightenment is not enough, so he responds, *"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."* (v3) and *"born of water and Spirit."* (v5) You see, we can only 'see' in the light, and Jesus is the Light of the World, who offers each one of us rebirth into light and faith. Then we hear those comforting words, that inspire faith, *"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."* My hunch is that, like many of us, Nicodemus was

on a faith journey, in formation; the phrase *“came to Jesus by bight”* is therefore a metaphor for his personal darkness for to truly know Jesus is to live in the light of faith.

Hearing (or reading) this passage, we may have some sympathy with Nicodemus – Jesus is, in some ways an overwhelming figure, beyond our imagining, inspirational and highly controversial all at once. No wonder Nicodemus is careful, and on some levels doesn't seem to get it all in one go, but then neither do we. Yes, he is on a faith journey like us and he persists, returning again and again. He cares about Jesus and what he has to say, he listens and learns; he is enlightened by him. The same is true of us, if we persist in regular worship and study of God's Word – yet living in the light of faith is perhaps not always as easy as it sounds.

We start by recognizing our reliance upon light for so much, for without it and its energy humanity wouldn't survive very long. And without Jesus, the light to enlighten the nations; now that really would be darkness. Yet God gives up Jesus to the cross because the driving force behind all that our Lord said and did is God's creative love: *“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.”* (v16) And His eternal and life-giving intention is not that people's sinfulness, stupidity – darkness of heart may be shown up and punished, but that all may find new life: *“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*(v17)

Faith itself, just like light and energy are gifts from God: and they are good! But as with all gifts, it is down to us to recognise their value and use them accordingly. Jesus calls Nicodemus to a radical change of heart and mind, to new birth and to live by the light of faith. He calls us to do the same, that we may recognise him, the light who overcomes the darkness and the one who came from heaven, from God, and was “lifted up” (v.14) on the cross. In him alone is forgiveness and new life, the light of faith. Then, our task as Christians today in a world of immense challenge, not least in the face of the climate emergency, is to point beyond ourselves to the real mystery of God and the challenge of his kingdom, for we are people called to *‘walk in the light of life.’* (see 1 John 1:7)

Today's Gospel passage doesn't tell us how Nicodemus responded to our Lord's challenge of faith, but by his later actions just before the crucifixion and at Jesus' burial, he appears very much on our Lord's side. Perhaps, after all, he has truly recognised the light of life and by contrast, the horror of Good Friday, the darkness of evil. This week's character in our Lent groups, The Roman Centurion, speaking of Jesus acclaims, “Certainly this man was innocent.” (Luke 23: 47) Jesus, the light of the world, the innocent victim who offers his life for sinners, who dies the darkest of deaths that we may know light and life eternal.

As people of faith we are called to fully engage, to participate in the life, values, death and resurrection of Jesus who is God with us. We do this in the hope of Easter, that there is light abounding and there is hope for all of us, if we too choose to walk in the light of faith and lead others towards Easter too. So don't be passive on the sidelines or walk in the dark. Instead, let's walk confidently with Christ in the light, committed to our faith which saves! Amen.

Father Damian Harrison-Miles, March 2026.