



### Opening Prayer for Lent (Cranmer's *Collect for Purity*)

Almighty God,  
to whom all hearts are open, all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden;  
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts,  
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love you,  
and worthily magnify your holy name;  
through Christ our Lord. **Amen**

### 'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

If you had to sum up what it means to be a disciple, what would your three top priorities be, and why?

### Psalm of the Week – Psalm 121 (StF 830)

I lift up my eyes to the hills,  
**from where is my help to come?**  
My help comes from the Lord,  
**the maker of heaven and earth.**  
He will not suffer your foot to stumble;  
**he who watches over you will not sleep.**  
Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel,  
**shall neither slumber nor sleep.**  
The Lord himself watches over you;

**the Lord is your shade at your right hand,**  
so that the sun shall not strike you by day,  
**neither the moon by night.**

The Lord shall keep you from all evil;  
**it is he who shall keep your soul.**

The Lord will keep watch over your going out and coming in,  
**from this time forth for evermore.**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;  
**as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.**  
**Amen**

### Prayers of Renewal

Jesus told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him,  
they needed to deny themselves, and take up their crosses.  
God calls us into that same movement  
of dying to sin and rising again with Christ.  
In this quiet space for reflection,  
let us bring to God those things in need of renewal:

*Silence is kept for a few moments...*

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**have mercy upon us.**

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**have mercy upon us.**

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**grant us peace.**

God of our journeys and false starts and new beginnings,  
you walk with us all of our days,  
and nothing in life or death or all creation  
can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ.

Thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes,  
share with us in our worries and struggles,  
and lead us onwards into fullness of life.  
We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus. **Amen**

**Reading**     John 3:1 – 17

### **Sermon**

Have any of you ever seen the television show *Hunted*, on Channel Four? This programme challenges the people who sign up to go on the run for twenty-five days, relying on their network of contacts and the kindness of strangers for shelter, support and resources. Those hunting, and seeking to capture, the fugitives are a mixture of former police, military and security forces personnel. For the purpose of the programme, various powers of the State have been recreated, such as access to CCTV, automatic number plate recognition, the power to intercept bank transactions, phone communications, and so forth, and the right to search through personal possessions and electronic devices. As you can imagine, it isn't easy to evade capture with that level of resources being put into finding you, and keeping 'under the radar' is a key part of being successful in this programme.

Given the chance, I would love to go on the show – perhaps I should make it the goal of my first sabbatical, when that happens! Although roughing it and camping out in the wild is something I could do if it's the only way to keep out of sight, I do like my creature comforts, so staying hidden and keeping moving would be challenging. Most folk on the show seem to keep in pairs, though some prefer to go it alone and it's not clear which is the most successful model. Given that my wife thinks I'm mad to even contemplate this, I would either need to find another partner-in-crime or fly solo! In real life, when we choose to go it alone, it can be for a wide variety of reasons. Today's text – from the Gospel of John – shows somebody who had good reasons

to keep what he was doing to himself... Nicodemus was a respected synagogue leader, who was clearly intrigued by and drawn to Jesus in these early days of his ministry, but who was not yet ready to take the risk of being seen in his company. Hence, Nicodemus relied on the cover of darkness to achieve his goal of meeting with Jesus.

However, there's far more going here than is immediately apparent, as John's Gospel is rich in symbolism and double-meanings. When we're told that Nicodemus sought out Jesus by night (John 3:1), for example, the text is telling us that Nicodemus was not just someone afraid to be seen approaching Jesus in daylight, but also was a man who was not living in the light of God, but instead in a kind of spiritual darkness. Later on, when Judas left the last supper to betray Jesus, it again tells us 'it was night'. Nicodemus tried to butter up Jesus by flattering him; he must have come from God, because the signs he's performed, like turning water into wine during the wedding at Cana, in the previous chapter, wouldn't be possible *apart from* by being in the presence of God. Jesus was not being drawn in and instead cut to the heart of the matter: 'Listen up! You can't see the Kingdom of God without being born from above!'. Flummoxed by an unexpected response like this, Nicodemus fell into the trap of taking it all literally, asking 'How does that work then? Can an old man re-enter a mum's womb, and be physically born again?'

Jesus responded to this misunderstanding by speaking about being born of water and the Spirit. *Water* points both to physical birth, and the act of baptism; *Spirit* points to the spiritual rebirth baptism brings about, and so the pair belong together. Jesus also contrasted Spirit with the flesh, which in John symbolises a separation from God and a lack of faith. Thus, being 'born from above' means being renewed by and embracing an intimate relationship with God-in-Christ, which in turn means no hiding away. This was all too much for Nicodemus, who wondered how it could be true; Jesus in turn wondered how a teacher of the Law may fail to understand! What was more, if talking

about earthly things like 'water' and 'birth' was too hard going, being told about heavenly things would have blown his mind!

Now, at this point, Nicodemus leaves the narrative. However, when he appears again, it's clear that – despite still being in the dark – his covert conversation with Jesus had a profound effect on him. When he next crops up, in chapter seven, Nicodemus found himself being ridiculed by the other Pharisees for suggesting that Jesus shouldn't be condemned without a fair hearing. Later on, and in a detail found uniquely in John's Gospel, he helped his fellow Pharisee, Joseph of Arimathea, anoint the crucified Christ ready for burial and, together, they laid him out in the empty tomb. Something about this encounter with Jesus was life-changing – even for a man already open to God, and who had always taken faith seriously. This unexpected moment of renewal for Nicodemus demonstrates clearly how the movement of God's love is often one which surprises us.

So, what might this mean for us today? Well, while some of us might be a little uncomfortable with the language of being born from above because its associations with certain branches of conservative faith, especially in the United States, the language of *conversion* is pretty well established in Methodism. However, I would argue, it's also one of those terms which is much misunderstood. Conversion is not just a one-off event some lucky Christians get to experience, but instead is a process. Today's reading reminds us that conversion is perhaps best described as a continuous process of being surprised anew by the grace and love of God which is passionate and fiery and beyond anything we can imagine. To be born from above is to be 'swept up' into the dance of the Trinity, and so into the embrace of a love which is passionate, wild and untameable even in the face of our reticence and stumbling. Hence, 'conversion' isn't a case of 'say a prayer and all will be well', but a process of choosing each day not to hide away and try to evade capture, but to step into the light of God's love, and embrace a lifelong-and-some pattern of change, risk and growth.

This was the central point which Nicodemus was struggling to grasp in his exchange with Jesus. For all of his considerable learning, and a lifelong grounding in the scriptures of Israel, he really struggled to understand Jesus' ministry as being about sweeping people up into this movement of love, and so offering a fresh start, a new beginning and space to grow into all we're capable of being. Now, it is easy to judge Nicodemus; indeed, many of the commentaries I consulted in the preparation of this sermon were more than a little severe in their appraisal of him, in my opinion. Yet, how many of us, if we are really honest with ourselves, can state that we've never tried to hide away from a risky encounter with Jesus in the daylight, either because we are scared of change, or because we're worried others will see us?

To return to the image of being 'hunted', how often do we try to hide away from God, despite knowing this isn't possible in practice? Like the psalmist says, if I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me (Psalm 139:9 – 10). Even if we approach Jesus by night, for fear of how the people around us will react, we may still find ourselves surprised by grace, and drawn in to the movement of God's love. Lent is a period in which we're invited to take time for reflection and self-examination in the light of stories like that of Nicodemus. Whether we have never encountered the love of God and this is all new, or whether we have been coming to Church all our lives, perhaps the fundamental issue here is whether we are willing to take a risk on God-in-Christ. Hiding away might seem like the safer option – and indeed there is risk that comes with encountering the love of God. However, unlike the 'love' some of us have encountered within abusive, broken or inadequate human relationships, God's love doesn't have a hidden agenda, nor is God motivated by selfish needs, as if somehow incomplete. God's love is, instead, freely given, and concerned with *our* fullness of life.

There is a world of a difference between being hunted down by that which doesn't ultimately care about us, and being sought out by the

God who showed what costly and freely given love looks like. John's Gospel sums it up neatly: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everybody who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life. God didn't send the Son into the world to condemn it, but so that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16–17). The cross lays bare the full extent to which God loves the whole of what God has created, and how God embraces it with both arms outstretched in defenceless love. Yes, change and growth can be challenging, and sometimes we may still be tempted to approach God only under the cover of darkness; yet, this is love which always can be trusted as Nicodemus, and countless millions after him, have discovered. May we have the courage to embrace this for ourselves and allow God to surprise us with breath-taking love. Amen

### **Spiritual Exercise of the Week**

The Examen is a way of reflecting on the day that's past, where we have caught glimpses of God at work, and what we need to change in our lives in order to make God's love visible to those we meet.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

God of costly and self-giving love,  
as we journey onwards towards the cross of Christ  
and seek transformation for ourselves, and for your world,  
we bring our prayers for others to you.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those living in places blighted by war and conflict  
and all those forced to leave everything behind to find refuge.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those impacted right now by climate change,  
and all working to support communities at the sharp end.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are unwell in body, mind or spirit,  
and all working in health and social care in these tough times.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are feeling lonely, isolated or anxious,  
and especially for those struggling to accept they are lovable.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are struggling to connect with you,  
and especially those who feel abandoned or confused.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are bereaved in this time of turmoil,  
especially those struggling to access support and care.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,  
and in the presence of the Holy Spirit,  
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

### **Lord's Prayer**

### **Blessing**

As you journey onwards in God's love,  
towards the foot of the cross of Christ,  
may you step forward boldly and act justly,  
so that through you, all may know that they matter.  
And the blessing of God,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,  
be upon you, and all whom you love and pray for,  
now and for ever. **Amen**