

**Botley Baptist Church** One Church Way, Botley, Oxford OX2 9TH

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God loves you and me soooo much,  
Have you any idea what He will do for us?

*John 3:16*



*7 March, 2021*

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Listen to this hymn; centre you thoughts on Christ who calls us to follow Him.

**LISTEN**            **Create in Me O God, A Clean Heart**

**REFLECT on these WORDS** (from Tearfund Lent Reflection)

*'Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always.'* (1 Chronicles 16:11)

There must be always remaining in every life, some place for the singing of angels, some place for that which in itself is breathless and beautiful. Howard Thurman.

Lord, Lord, open Unto Me  
Open unto me, light for my darkness  
Open unto me, courage for my fear  
Open unto me, hope for my despair  
Open unto me, peace for my turmoil  
Open unto me, joy for my sorrow  
Open unto me, strength for my weakness  
Open unto me, wisdom for my confusion  
Open unto me, forgiveness for my sins  
Open unto me, tenderness for my toughness  
Open unto me, love for my hates  
Open unto me, Thy Self for myself  
Lord, Lord, open unto me!

*Howard Thurman, Howard (1899 - 1981)  
was a writer who influenced Martin Luther King Jr and others.  
From his 'Meditations of the Heart'*

**HYMN**                    **Here is Love, vast as the Ocean**

**PRAYER for the WORLD**

The heavens thunder and resound with the glory of God! The firmament proclaims God's handiwork. We too are God's handiwork! Open our eyes Lord, our minds and our hearts Father, to see **YOU** in each other, and proclaim, **HOW GREAT IS OUR GOD!**

We are one in spirit with Christ-lovers around the world, and throughout time. We worship with with them across geography and across time! Father! May the strength of our voice glorify Your Name and exalt your Honour and Majesty!

As we pray dear God of Mercy and Grace, break down the dividing walls of hostility between us, the walls that keep us separate and isolated, walls that hide us as we nurse our wounds, and walls that withhold Your mercy and forgiveness. Breathe in us your Holy Spirit that we may be your agents of reconciliation.

We pray for Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, for whom today makes the end of her five-year jail sentence. We pray that the government, the judiciary and all those involved in her incarceration, will be filled with your mercy and release her to be with her husband and daughter.

We pray for children returning to school tomorrow, Monday. We ask you to protect them, all of them from catching the virus. We pray for their teachers, school administrators, Heads and Governors. May they have your wisdom to know what is right and act accordingly.

Today we also pray for families who mourn: the family of Sgt Gavin Hillier killed by live ammunition at Castlemartin Range; the family of missing woman Bennylyn Burke and two-year-old daughter;

We also remember families in our Church, one who has her granddaughter in hospital going through chemo for leukaemia, one whose daughter is living with constant pain, two who are looking for jobs, those who are feeling alone

without fellowship and companionship with Church members, those recovering from recent surgical interventions, several in “old folks homes”, each well looked after, but lacking fellowship.

Loving God, as we surrender these people to you, unnamed here for security reasons, but you know each one by name, we faithfully wait to hear news of answered prayer, that we may praise and glorify Your Name for all to hear.

All this we ask, because Your Son said, anything we ask in His Name, you our Father will be pleased to answer. **AMEN.**

**READING:** There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. Late one night he visited Jesus and said, *“Rabbi, we all know you’re a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren’t in on it.”*

Jesus said, *“You’re absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to—to God’s kingdom.”*

*“How can anyone,”* said Nicodemus, *“be born who has already been born and grown up? You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb and be born again. What are you saying with this ‘born-from-above’ talk?”*

Jesus said, *“You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit.*

*“So don’t be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be ‘born from above’—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or*

*where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone 'born from above' by the wind of God, the Spirit of God."*

Nicodemus asked, *"What do you mean by this? How does this happen?"*

*Jesus said, "You're a respected teacher of Israel and you don't know these basics? Listen carefully. I'm speaking sober truth to you. I speak only of what I know by experience; I give witness only to what I have seen with my own eyes. There is nothing secondhand here, no hearsay. Yet instead of facing the evidence and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions. If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don't believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can't see, the things of God?"*

*"No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man. In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.*

*"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.*

*"This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is."*

**AMEN**

## **HYMN**                      **When Peace Like a River**

### **MESSAGE**

Writing almost 65 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, every chapter in Disciple John's account of Jesus' life, paints a separate portrait of Christ, each giving us greater insight into His character and nature.

First, John introduces us to people whom Jesus drew to Himself, not from among established religious leaders who knew the scriptures, or the *Who's Who* in society, but a **new** group of **people**<sup>1</sup> from all walks of life, who recognised Jesus as the Messiah and were united in their desire to follow Him.

John then reveals Jesus who transforms ordinary water set aside for external purification (outside-in), into **new wine** that changes us inside-out.

John takes us into the Temple courtyard where Jesus introduced **new worship**, cleansing His Father's House of those who took advantage of those who came to the Temple in reverence and devotion to worship God, esp. the poor.

Today we discover the power of transformation which results in **New Birth**.

Most of us know Nicodemus from his visit with Jesus in the dead of night.<sup>2</sup> We meet him for the second time when he questioned the legitimacy of Jesus' arrest, "... *Does our Torah judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?*", to which his colleagues poked fun and questioned his loyalty, *'Are you from Galilee too?'* [Whose side are you on?] (7:50-52).

We meet Nicodemus for the third and final encounter when he joined Joseph of Arimathea with a *mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight, bound Jesus' body in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.*<sup>3</sup>

Nicodemus was one of those impressed by Jesus' signs (2:23) and a member of the ruling Sanhedrin. He was religious (a Pharisees), influential (a ruler)

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:35ff

<sup>2</sup> John 3

<sup>3</sup> John 19:38-40

educated (Nicodemus is a Greek name meaning *Conqueror of the People*). John invites us to imagine this “Conqueror of the People”, an honoured member of a closed network of powerful people, only **as long as** he complied with their agenda and abided by their rules. This was the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court made up of an elite group of 71 *Rabbi*.

John’s audience would have felt pity and compassion for Nicodemus. A man whose name conveyed power, a member of a powerful group, compelled to visit Jesus *after dark one evening*, between midnight and 3 a.m. Did Nicodemus come by night because he was timid? Did he come at night for an uninterrupted interview with Jesus? Did he draw the proverbial “short straw” and was **sent** to interview Jesus? We don’t know. But Nicodemus was strangely drawn to Jesus.

One imagines this man, part of a powerful elite whose authority was absolute, revealing his quandary.

- Not sure how to address Him, Nicodemus greets Jesus as, *Rabbi*, one of us.
- He tries to legitimise his visit...**We ALL**, *my colleagues and I on the Sanhedrin, we ALL know...*
- Then he stutters and splutters, *But you are not any Rabbi, rather one sent by God to teach us*. This is a contradiction in terms: a Rabbi was a teacher of the law. A *Teacher* was the repository of **ALL** knowledge and wisdom, who knew all there was to know. Admitting God has sent someone *to teach us*, would not have gone down well with the other 70 *Rabbi* in the Sanhedrin.
- Nicodemus’ final admission was, *Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you*. Did the Sanhedrin convene to discuss that Jesus was performing miracle because God was with Him? Likely not! More likely, Nicodemus was expressing his personal view, hoping to have it endorsed.

What follows is that Rabbi Nicodemus becomes the student at the feet of Rabbi Jesus. *You called me Rabbi, right? Then let me teach you!* Jesus exposes the errors in Rabbinical teaching.

First, you have to be born from above, not *re-birth, regeneration* or *restoration*. You have experienced physical birth, but you must also be born from above.

Nicodemus made the first mistake made by most Teachers of the Law - literalism. *What do you mean? How can an old man re-enter his mother's birth canal and be born again? Absurd!*

Jesus reveals to Nicodemus, the foolishness of Rabbinical teaching:

1. You teach people to purify themselves through ceremonial washing in order to worship God. Purity is not the same as Holiness. Purity is on the outside; Holiness comes from the inside! It is Holiness that lets you into Heaven, not purity!
2. You can never do enough to qualify for entrance into heaven. To belong to God's heavenly kingdom, one must be born into it: change your parentage - acknowledge God as your Father in Heaven, and He accepts you as His child (son/daughter) into His home.
3. You teach judgement and put the fear of God into people. *God sent His Son into the world not to judge it, but to save the world through Him. There is no judgement against anyone who believes in God's purpose in and through His Son. Anyone who does not believe in Him, has already been judged for not believing His Son.*
4. Finally, *Judgement is not punishment! God's light came into the world to expose those who love the darkness. Those who do right come into the light, **so that others can see they are doing what God wants, (living as God desires for them).***

Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus brings us face-to-face with the practice of our own faith and life in Christ.

- Do we live life as if God is our Father, in obedience to Him, and in keeping with His plan for this world?
- What hinders us from being born again into the Kingdom of God, where God is our Father?
  - ▶ the practice of religion as opposed to the practice of faith in God?
  - ▶ the belief that external purity is more important than internal Holiness?
  - ▶ that God's judgement is more powerful and to be feared, than God's love which rescues us **from** all harm and saves us **for** eternal life with Him?
  - ▶ the difficulty in believing God's love is **SO** great, that He was willing to sacrifice His Son's life as ransom, in order that ours is spared for eternity with Him?

## **AMEN**

**PRAYER** Eternal God! Help us beware of all that is not of You, to release all that is not honouring to You, and to learn Your ways. That all we do, we may do in the light for all to see and glorify Your Name. **AMEN.**

**HYMN**            **Then Sings my Soul... How Great Thou Art**

## **BENEDICTION**

Leave this time and space of worship with the simple faith, that God's ways are not your ways; that His plans are far superior to yours for the simple reason that His plans will be accomplished and yours may not!

Leave this time and space of worship in the full knowledge that God's Son, Jesus our Christ, is waiting to receive you into our Father's home.

Ans leave this time and space with the simple assurance, that the Holy Spirit will accomplish in you, the plan of God, but you must let Him lead.

**AMEN**

**LISTEN & Sing...**

**... while you make coffee/tea/juice...**