



This short act of worship has been prepared for you to use while you are unable to attend worship in a church building. We invite you to spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you.

**Call to Worship** (from Psalm 29)

Let us give to the Lord the glory of His name;  
**We shall worship God in holy splendour**  
His voice thunders over the waters and shakes  
the wilderness;  
**All in his church cry 'Glory!';**  
May God give us strength;  
**Let us seek his blessing of peace**

**Hymn:** StF 11 Holy, holy, holy

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!  
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee;  
Holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty,  
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee,  
casting down their golden crowns around the  
glassy sea;  
cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee,  
who wert, and art, and evermore shall be.

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide thee,  
though the sinful human eye thy glory may not  
see,  
only though art holy; there is none beside thee,  
perfect in power, in love, and purity.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord Ggo Almighty!  
All they works shall praise they name in earth and  
sky and sea;  
holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty  
God in three Persons, Blessed Trinity

*Reginald Heber*

**Opening prayers**

Loving God, who conceived life,  
originates ingenuity, embraces individuality,  
welcomes everyone, celebrates diversity,  
encourages unity, offers serenity,  
gifts simplicity, lavishes compassion,  
we worship you!

Living Jesus who breathes our air,  
walks our streets, feels our pain,  
sheds tears, enjoys company,  
bubbles with laughter, holds our hands,  
we worship you!  
Gentle Spirit who strengthens fragile spirits,  
shelters the suffering, respire life and hope,  
transforms all sorrow, binds broken hearts,  
sets captives free,  
we worship you!  
Beautiful Trinity of Love,  
for your presence in our lives,  
for your comfort and company,  
for shaking us out of tired routines,  
and calling us ever to follow you  
then, blessing our journey with unexpected  
discoveries, expanding our horizons,  
tendering endless encouragement  
and traveling with us,  
we worship you!

*Louise Gough: worshipwords.co.uk*

**Gospel:** John 3:1-18

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, 'Are you

a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

<sup>11</sup> 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> '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.

<sup>17</sup> 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup> Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

### Sermon

This conversation Nicodemus initiates with Jesus come out of his own curiosity, his desire for understanding because knowledge is what makes Nicodemus tick.

If we carried on reading, we'd find ourselves hearing about the Samaritan woman who Jesus meets at the well. These 2 stories are deliberately put next to each other by John to provide us with contrast. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, he's an elected leader and he's a teacher. We might infer that he's pretty wealthy, or at least, fairly comfortable. He's a Jew, we know his name and he's a man. And all of this points to someone respectable. A pillar of the community. Educated and intelligent.

By contrast, we don't know the Samaritan woman's name. We know she's a woman, she's of an ethnic origin despised by the Jews. She's divorced, many times over and lives with the shame of her current relationship. She's ostracised even within her own community. All of this points to someone who is utterly disrespectful.

Nicodemus visits Jesus at night, suggesting he's worried to be seen in the company of this controversial itinerant preacher. His curiosity gets the better of him, but he's ashamed and possibly fearful, so needs the cover of darkness for

protection. He's protecting his own reputation and perhaps his own wellbeing. He would be foolhardy to do otherwise. And yet Nicodemus sees something in Jesus he's not seen before – he's heard lots of religious men, good men, been in their company and grown from their influence. But Jesus is special: Nicodemus can see that. He can see God working through him. He doesn't deny it and here he might stand alone from his contemporaries, who are eager to mock and to challenge; to criticise and condemn. Nicodemus doesn't do any of that: he's certainly heard about the miracles, perhaps even witnessed them and he knows that these things come from God. And that's a brave position to hold in the volatile social-political world they live in.

Jesus can see he wants to know more. Here we have a man of learning, wanting to understand. All of his previous learning, his education, the Scriptures he's read have led him to become the man he is. But Jesus tells him something quite extraordinary and Nicodemus is left baffled. His head is totally screwed: you must be born again. This makes no sense to him. He understands biology and he knows it's not possible. He takes what Jesus is saying completely literally. His brain won't compute.

Let's go back to that Samaritan woman for a moment. When her conversation with Jesus is over, she goes back to her community and tells them, "I think, I'm not sure, but I might have met with the Messiah. Maybe. Possibly." She knows. She lacks confidence but she gets it in a way Nicodemus is left discombobulated.

But then, we shouldn't be surprised by these 2 stories side by side. For this is the gospel, condensed here. The stalwarts, the religious folk, those who consider themselves better than others; these are the ones who miss the point. The disciples are often in that group. The outcasts, the downtrodden, the discriminated and the poor – they see Jesus for who he is. They seem to understand his metaphors. The language may be poetic, but Jesus knows you don't need a PhD in theology to have your life changed by God.

The Bible is a picture book – it is rich in imagery and the words are beautiful. We can so often get bogged down by the small typeface and endless columns of text that we forget that this is the living word of God. And it comes to life when we give those words pictures.

The Street Bible puts it like this: *You need to be reconceived, redeveloped, redelivered and then reborn. Physical people create physical babies. God's Holy Spirit brings spiritual people to life.*

I like that phrase: reconceived, redeveloped, redelivered, reborn. It's all about going back to the start. Some Christians describe an event in time when they were "born again" and can pinpoint it to a date and time. But most can't and I'm one of those. I've never had a Damascus road experience, but what I have had are before and after experiences. Events which have changed me. Shaped who I am. And in each one of those experiences I was being redeveloped, remoulded, reborn.

Being reborn is about putting us back to a position where we are right with God. Because that's where we are when we are first physically born. We're made in God's image, made in the image of perfection, the image of holiness, the image of the divine. And when Jesus tells Nicodemus he needs to be born again, it's about retracing those steps back to our origins, back to the point where our relationship with God has no barriers.

Birth is a messy business as any mother will tell you. It's painful and bloody. It's not a barrel of laughs for the dads either. Being born again, is not necessarily a thing of beauty. It can take a while, those labour pains. Think of where you are in your life right now. The things that have made you the person today. I'd be very surprised you said that none of those experiences had been without pain, without tears, without a struggle.

In this encounter Jesus challenges Nicodemus to move from theory to practice, from knowledge to faith, from curiosity to commitment. Jesus says let the spirit come in and only then will you be transformed. You can't do it by yourself. I find some of myself within Nicodemus – desperate to make sense of the world, seeking answers in learning. Jesus resists the heresy of taking things literally, and says we need to experience God for ourselves. To *enter* the Kingdom of God, to immerse ourselves, and not to look on from a distance. For those of us who like being in control and like understanding, it's no wonder we find these words of Jesus so hard to grasp.

Being born again is a recognition that we can't mend ourselves alone. We need God to do it for us. And actually we need each other too, which is why the church exists. Communion. Community.

Giles Fraser, former canon of St Pauls Cathedral says that at best the church is like Alcoholics Anonymous. A safe place where we can all come and declare, publicly, sometimes painfully, I'm broken. A place to tell our stories and not to be judged for mistakes. And just like AA meetings are self-supporting, every member of the church recognises that brokenness within themselves, can say, I've been there, I understand, let me help you. That's what being reborn is about. Reliance. Total opposite of our cultures insistence that independence is a good thing: it's not.

That Samaritan woman at the well came for water and Jesus told her about living water. Nicodemus asks, "How can these things be?" and Jesus tells him about starting again, a slate wiped clean. Being born again is a cleansing experience. Getting rid of all that which muddies our lives. Pollutes us. Returning to a state God intended: to live in holiness, to live to the best we can possibly be, to live in harmonious relationship with God and those around us.

Baptism reminds us of the waters of birth, of returning to that state of transparency in our relationship with God, when we didn't have to understand it, we simply had to experience it. Bishops Rachel Treweek, in her book *Encounters* quotes of theologian Michael Jinkins, when he says, 'We are soaked to the skin in the death of Christ. Our union with Christ drips from us...We trails wet footprints of this drenching where we go; we never dry off.'

In being born again, may we never dry off. May we leave wet footprints wherever we go, shedding the love of Christ in our wake, immersed in the overflowing love of God. Amen

### **Intercessions**



For our prayers I invite you to imagine you are beside a beautiful pond, away from the hustle and bustle with only sounds of nature filling the air. The water is still and silent and reflects like a mirror. In your hand is a smooth cool stone. Throw it into the middle of that pond and watch it drop and see the first circle appear.

In this circle are the people closest to us. Friends, family, the irreplaceable ones. There aren't many within this small circle, but we know them well, their strengths and weaknesses, their needs and their desires. We pray for them.

**Keep hope within and fear without – hold us in the circle of your love**

The circle spreads and a new one appears. Look at the second circle. Here are people we know well, people we work with, neighbours, friends from long ago and relatives we don't see often, but we care for each one none the less. The people we send Christmas cards and hear sporadic news. The names on our church notices. There are many needs within this circle and we remember some and pray for them.

**Keep hope within and fear without – hold us in the circle of your love**

The circle spreads again. Look at the third and fourth circles. People we know less with, those we exchange a brief greeting at the school gates, whilst walking the dog or buying a newspaper. There are hundreds in these circles, too many to pray for individually and in any case we don't know their needs. But they are known to God. God has loved them from their birth. Let them be washed by these circles of prayer.

**Keep hope within and fear without – hold us in the circle of your love**

The circle spreads right out and reaches the edge of the pond. One after another they lap against the banks. Our prayers extend to the far reaches of our world, of places and people we only know of through the news. Our prayer is an act of love for all the earth and everything in it. Let us delight to encompass all things within the circle of God's extraordinary care and keeping.

**Keep hope within and fear without – hold us in the circle of your love**

Gracious and loving God, our prayer this morning is a small pebble thrown into a large expanse of

need. We thank you that your love is greater still and we entrust every circle of our prayers to your generous mercy and grace, through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen

**Hymn: StF 503 Love Divine**

Love Divine, all loves excelling,  
Joy of heaven, to earth come down,  
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,  
All thy faithful mercies crown.  
Jesus, thou art all compassion,  
Pure unbounded love thou art;  
Visit us with thy salvation,  
Enter every trembling heart.

Come, almighty to deliver,  
Let us all thy grace receive;  
Suddenly return, and never,  
Never more thy temples leave.  
Thee we would be always blessing,  
Serve thee as thy hosts above,  
Pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,  
Glory in thy perfect love.

Finish then thy new creation  
Pure and spotless let us be;  
Let us see thy great salvation,  
Perfectly restored in thee,  
Changed from glory into glory,  
Till in heaven we take our place,  
Till we cast our crowns before thee,  
Lost in wonder, love, and praise!

**Blessing**

God who created the world,  
Jesus the Son given for the world,  
Holy Spirit ever present in the world,  
be with us in our worship that we may know the fullness of the Holy One.  
As God lives in Triune community,  
so may we live in communion with God and each other.  
Amen.

*from the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand*

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