

*Born Again* By Jennie McGinlay

Hymns from *Singing the Faith*

Call to worship (from Hymn 24)

Come, now is the time to worship  
Come, now is the time to give your heart  
Come, just as you are to worship  
Come, just as you are before your God

Hymn 424

God forgave my sin in Jesus' name,  
I've been born again in Jesus' name;  
And in Jesus' name I come to you  
To share His love as He told me to.

He said: Freely, freely, you have received,  
Freely, freely give;  
Go in My name, and because you believe  
Others will know that I live.'

All power is given in Jesus' name,  
In earth and heaven in Jesus' name;  
And in Jesus' name I come to you  
To share His power as He told me to.

He said: Freely, freely, you have received,  
Freely, freely give;  
Go in My name, and because you believe  
Others will know that I live.'

Prayer of Approach (from [www.urc.org.uk](http://www.urc.org.uk))

Lord, our loving God, whose ways are mysterious and yet whose love is deep and tender; you provide for all our needs. Make yourself known to us as we worship you now: give us words to praise you, hearts to love you and minds to know you. Help us to offer all to you, and to know your mysterious presence with us.

Amen.

Prayer of Confession

We come before you now to confess our sins. We have sometimes failed in our faith, failed to entrust our lives to you and failed to allow the Holy Spirit to guide us through life.

Please forgive us for those times when we do not behave as Christ's ambassadors in the world, when we do not show love to our fellow human beings and are wrapped up in our own concerns and worries.

Please strengthen us in faith, send your Spirit to transform us continuously and replace our self-centredness with love.

We thank you for your gracious acceptance of us with all our faults and weaknesses, and for your willingness to let us confess again and again.

To all who turn to Christ, he says, "Your sins are forgiven."

Amen

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
Your Kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven  
Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins,  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours.  
Now and for ever. Amen

## Reading: John 3:1-17 (NIV)

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus at night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.’

<sup>3</sup>Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’

<sup>4</sup>‘How can someone be born when they are old?’ Nicodemus asked. ‘Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!’

<sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. <sup>6</sup>Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. <sup>7</sup>You should not be surprised at my saying, “You must be born again.” <sup>8</sup>The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.’

<sup>9</sup>‘How can this be?’ Nicodemus asked.

<sup>10</sup>‘You are Israel’s teacher,’ said Jesus, ‘and do you not understand these things? <sup>11</sup>Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup>I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.’

<sup>16</sup>For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

## Reflection

I wonder if, like me, you are a fan of the TV programme *Line of Duty*. Series 6 concluded a couple of weeks ago and I have to confess that I, along with a few million others, was absolutely hooked. It is basically a story about a fictional police anti-corruption unit and the plot became incredibly complex, resulting in much online discussion about the intricate twists and turns, including subtle and confusing references to characters and events which had been crucial in earlier series. Addictive television, yet at times *so* hard to follow!

I mention this because, from time to time, we read a Bible passage which leaves us scratching our heads and asking, ‘Erm, what...how...sorry, what on earth does that mean?’ Jesus’ night-time conversation with Nicodemus is indeed a head-scratcher.

Nicodemus seems to have been a man who could relate to sense and logic. He was a Pharisee – highly educated with a sophisticated understanding of Jewish religion and law. He was curious about what Jesus had been doing and saying, but as a Pharisee, one of a group who were critical and deeply suspicious of Jesus, he came to Him under cover of darkness. We can safely assume that this was because he didn’t want the other Pharisees to find out.

He opens the conversation with these logical, reasonable words: ‘*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.*’

Jesus’ reply puzzled him: ‘*Very truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again.*’

Nicodemus would have had a concept of the Kingdom of God, which he would likely have understood as the restoration on Earth of rule by God over the Jewish nation, through a messianic figure. He would therefore naturally question Jesus’ strange statement with his impeccable Pharisee logic and common sense. Given the secretive night-time visit, I think we can assume that his question was genuine, that he was not merely trying to catch Jesus out.

He asked, ‘*How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!*’

We may well ask the same so let’s look at Jesus’ answer. He explains that a person must be born of water and the Spirit. As you might imagine, the meaning of this has been discussed at length by theologians, but most would agree that Jesus was talking about the cleansing water of baptism combined with and symbolizing a spiritual regeneration, that is, a regeneration which comes about by means of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus emphasizes this in verse 6, when he says, ‘*Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.*’

We were, of course, all born in the flesh, which, when we stop to consider it, is a fantastically, *seemingly* miraculous event in itself. Don't we all have a sense of the miraculous when we see a new baby, but of course that event is explained by the science of biology.

However, being born again, born of the Spirit, is arguably a *genuinely* miraculous event – quite outside the laws of nature and the physical. It is a radical new birth of a kind we cannot pin down and understand intellectually in a laboratory or a textbook.

Jesus also reminds us that this is something we do not control:

*'The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.'*

You may know that in biblical Greek, the word for "Spirit" is the same as that used for "wind." From an observer's point of view, this makes sense, for the wind is mysterious – we can hear, feel and see its effects but it is mysterious in origin and outside our control. Of course, from a scientific point of view, we do understand wind and can even tap its power, but we still cannot make it blow, control it or change its direction. This is clear to anyone who has seen wind turbines standing motionless on a still day.

Also, just as we did not control our physical birth, an entirely passive experience, we do not control our spiritual birth either.

However, unlike the wind, the Spirit is not just an impersonal force that happens to come your way if you are lucky. As we read in verse 15, *'everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.'*

If you choose Jesus, the Spirit will move in your direction, not because you demand it, but because God the Holy Spirit loves you and wants to give you rebirth.

The phrase *'born again'* has a bit of an image problem, in the UK at least. It may conjure up an image of an earnest, slightly manic person invading your personal space and asking aggressively, "Are you saved?" The words *'born again Christian'* can alarm people and make them suddenly remember an urgent appointment elsewhere. I confess that in the past it has had that effect on me!

Yet verse 7 says, *'You must be born again.'* Verse 3 tells us *'no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.'*

Being born again is not an optional extra to be tacked on to Christianity; *'born again Christian'* and *'Christian'* are synonyms. Good news though: you don't need to feel obliged to yell it from the rooftops and watch your friends scatter (although you can if you choose, of course!), but perhaps we do need to ask ourselves: Have I been born again? Have I been born of the Spirit, regenerated? Or has my faith been mainly in head, in my intellect until now?

The Spirit will move where He pleases but not in an arbitrary way. If you are a church member because you feel drawn to Jesus, it is likely that the Spirit is working in you already. Consider Nicodemus, curious about Jesus, struggling to "get it" but asking sincere questions.

Interestingly, later in John's gospel, we encounter Nicodemus twice more. In Chapter 7, he speaks up for Jesus when the religious leaders try to arrest him and in Chapter 19, he goes with Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus' body to the tomb. So it seems that he responded well to Jesus and possibly became a Christian.

There is nothing wrong with an intellectual, analytical and logical study and understanding of Christian faith, asking basic questions and trying to make sense of it all, but if that is all we do, we are not born again, not born of the Spirit. No textbook or commentary will bring you into the Kingdom of God, but trusting and following Jesus, and embracing rebirth in the Spirit will do just that. We *must* be born again and it is only through God the Holy Spirit that this is accomplished and we will see and be part of the Kingdom of God.

### Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray for our suffering world:

For those who have been affected by Covid, those who have lost family members, those who are suffering from long Covid.

We pray for those left lonely in lockdown, those who have had to face the day to day pressures of life without their usual support, for those who have suffered illness or bereavement during this time.

We thank you for and continue to pray for our medical staff, our exhausted health workers, care workers, nurses and doctors.

We pray for those countries still in the grip of the virus – in particular the people of India. Please wrap these people in your loving arms, bring comfort, hope and relief. Please bless the efforts of those trying to bring more doses of the vaccine to these places.

We pray for our circuit and our churches, for all of our sisters and brothers who are suffering in any way, whether or not their pain is known to us.

Please give us the strength to show love and compassion, as well as the humility to ask for help for ourselves.

Let us never lose sight of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, in whom all our hope is found.

We offer all our prayers to you in His name. Amen

#### Hymn 395

Spirit of the living God,  
Fall afresh on me.  
Spirit of the living God,  
Fall afresh on me.

Break me, melt me,  
Mould me, fill me,  
Spirit of the living God,  
Fall afresh on me.

#### Blessing (*adapted from a prayer on [www.faithandworship.com](http://www.faithandworship.com)*)

May the love of the Father,  
the tenderness of the Son,  
and the presence of the Spirit,  
gladden our hearts  
and bring peace to our souls,  
this day and always,

Amen.