

Collect, Readings and Reflection for 01 March 2026, the 2nd Sunday of Lent

Collect (*the Church's prayer for today*):

Almighty God,
you show to those who are in error the light of
your truth,
that they may return to the way of
righteousness:
grant to all those who are admitted
into the fellowship of Christ's religion,
that they may reject those things
that are contrary to their profession,
and follow all such things as are agreeable to
the same;
through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen

Almighty God,
by the prayer and discipline of Lent
may we enter into the mystery of
Christ's sufferings,
and by following in his Way
come to share in his glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

Readings: Romans 4:1-5,13-17; John 3:1-17

Today's reflection is by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Cain.

Born Again

Last week, Rebecca and a friend spent a few days at Gladstone's library near Chester. She would recommend. The gift shop yielded several postcards with quotations from the former Prime Minister, including this one:

"I do not believe that God's mercies are restricted to a small portion of the human family ... I was myself brought up to believe that salvation depended absolutely on the reception of a particular and very narrow creed. But long, long have I cast these weeds behind me."

There's a phrase in today's Gospel that has shaped Christian imagination for centuries, and I wonder whether it appeared in the narrow creed described by Gladstone. That phrase is "born again."

Jesus speaks these words to Nicodemus, a respected religious leader who comes to him under cover of night. Nicodemus is curious, unsettled, searching. And Jesus offers him an image of transformation so profound that it has echoed through Christian history. But the way the phrase has been used in modern times often bears little resemblance to the generous, expansive vision that Jesus describes as the kingdom of God.

The term “born again” has sometimes been used to create exclusivity or hierarchy, implying that only certain Christians—those who can point to a particular kind of conversion experience—are the “real” ones. Yet such exclusiveness contradicts the inclusive love that Jesus demonstrated.

It has also been used judgmentally, as a way of drawing lines between insiders and outsiders. In some cases, it has even underpinned harmful practices, such as forms of conversion therapy, rooted in the belief that people must be remade to fit a narrow understanding of holiness. This kind of judgementalism works against Jesus’ example of engagement and hospitality. It works against a central idea of Christian faith that all are made in God’s image.

At other times, the phrase has been used to justify moral laxity, as if grace means that obedience no longer matters. But using “born again” to sidestep moral responsibility can lead to an absence of justice and accountability in Christian witness. This, I would venture, might be a risk in Christian nationalism and any expression of faith that inserts other ideology into the gospel.

And perhaps most commonly, the phrase has been reduced to a single moment—a spiritual event that supposedly completes the Christian journey. But the life of faith is not a one-off experience; it is a lifelong process of growth, formation, and sanctification. Reducing it to a moment greatly impoverishes the life of faith.

Jesus’ words to Nicodemus were words of life, and yet they have so often caused confusion, division and real harm. So, how might we reclaim the phrase “born again?” I am going to suggest three ways.

1. Born again as awakening to a larger reality

When Jesus tells Nicodemus, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again,” he is not setting a test. He is describing a transformation of vision—a new way of seeing God, the world, and ourselves.

One helpful way to understand this might be through Plato’s allegory of the cave, a story told centuries before Jesus but deeply resonant with his teaching.

In Plato’s story, a group of people live chained inside a cave. They face a wall, and behind them a fire casts shadows of passing objects. Because they have never seen anything else, they believe the shadows are the whole of reality. But one person is freed, led out of the cave, and sees the world as it truly is—full of colour, depth, and light. When he returns to tell the others, they struggle to believe him. The shadows are all they’ve ever known.

To be “born again” is something like stepping out of that cave. It is to have our eyes opened to a much bigger story. It is to see the story that encompasses God, the Universe and Everything... a story that recognises the belovedness and dignity of each human soul... a story that stretches into eternity.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a worldview shaped by law, tradition, and certainty. Jesus invites him into a reality far larger than he imagined—a reality in which God’s love is not confined to a nation, a tribe, or a religious system, but is the very heartbeat of the universe.

2. Born again as stepping into God’s universal love

Our gospel passage includes the verse that has become the most quoted in the Bible—John 3:16. It is a verse that has been held up on placards, printed on T-shirts, and sometimes used as a weapon. But listen again to what it actually says:

“For God so loved the world...”

Not a select few.

Not the spiritually elite.

Not those who have had a particular kind of religious experience.

The world.

The text highlights three essential truths:

- Jesus is an act of God’s love.
- Jesus is for the world—everyone, not exclusive.
- Jesus is about salvation, not condemnation.

If we hear John 3:16 as a threat, we have misunderstood it.

If we use it to judge others, we have misused it.

If we wield it as a boundary marker, we have shrunk the gospel.

This is blessing language. It echoes the promise to Abraham that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” The God who calls Abraham is the God who sends Jesus: a God whose love is expansive, generous, and universal.

And this is the heart of being born again: stepping into a love that is bigger than our fears, bigger than our prejudices, bigger than our boundaries.

3. Born again as a journey toward resurrection

Finally, the phrase “born again” points us toward Easter.

Nicodemus comes in the night.

Jesus speaks of birth.

And the whole Gospel is moving toward a dawn that will break on the first day of the week.

To be born again is not simply to have a spiritual experience. It is to be caught up in the life of the risen Christ. It is to live now in the light of resurrection. It is to trust that God is making all things new—including us.

The final redemption of the term ‘born again’ is the promise of Easter Day, the promise of resurrection.

This is not a narrow creed.
It is not a badge of honour.
It is not a line in the sand.

It is the promise that God is not finished with us.
That transformation is possible.
That new life is possible.
That hope is possible.

Conclusion

So perhaps the invitation today is this:

Not to abandon the phrase “born again,” but to reclaim it.

And perhaps the invitation of Lent is to embrace the ongoing, grace-filled, Spirit-led transformation by which God opens our eyes, enlarges our hearts, and draws us into the vast, generous story of divine love.

A story big enough for Nicodemus.
Big enough for us.
Big enough for the world God so loves.

Amen.

