

## The Freedom of the Spirit

*There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'* 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?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I say to you, "You must be born from above." 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.' John 3.1-8

We may enter the kingdom of God: that is our calling and purpose – but we cannot get there except by 'being born of water and Spirit'. So says Jesus in his profound conversation with Nicodemus, himself a devout and worthy man, but someone in whom the vision of God has not yet quite come fully into *life*. This 'birth' and 'new birth' represent the renewal of our *physical* selves – including our moral integrity and the growth within us of virtue – alongside our *spiritual* selves, through which we begin to 'behold God', to pray, to contemplate the 'fair beauty of the Lord' (Psalm 27.4), and to exercise our capacity for awe and wonder, for worship and praise. In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus refers to our *baptism*, by which we are cleansed and made ready to do the work of God; but there is also a further 'baptism of the *Spirit*', by which we are truly and completely *awakened* before God. According to the first of these, we begin to fulfil the commandments of God; we renew our behaviour and habits and pattern of life. According to the second, we become truly alive – we return to the pristine condition in which we were created and implanted in Paradise, 'holy and blameless before God' (cf Colossians 1.22; Ephesians 1.4). There is a two-step process by which we are purged or cleansed, and then we are illuminated or awakened: in the traditional account of how our spiritual life matures, these both prepare for a final stage in which we see God face to face, and will be united with him in Glory.



Between the first stage and the second, there is an echo of the basic distinction which runs through the theology of St Paul between 'law' and 'grace'. The precepts of the Law – the 'commandments of God' as they are given in the *Torah* – help us know how to order our behaviour and train ourselves in the habits of righteousness; but we have not entered the destiny for which God

has really prepared us until we live according to the 'glorious liberty of the children of God' (Romans 8.21) – a perfect *freedom of spirit*, possible when our habits and behaviour conform to what God asks of us. To be holy and genuinely righteous is not to be hidebound by precepts and rules, but to have so ordered ourselves according to the precepts and rules that we are entirely unencumbered by the promptings of sinfulness, free once more, as were Adam and Eve before they disregarded the call of God. That is why St Paul describes it as *grace* – a *liberation* from the 'sin', a kind of *gift* instead of anything which we can ever merit by ourselves – 'for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death' (Romans 8.2).

St Augustine summarises how these two capacities cohere within us, the moral and the spiritual – the work of the *body* and that of the *soul* – in a famous rule: 'Love God, and then *do as you wish*'. It is almost as if he doesn't care about moral precepts and standards. What he means is that if we love God fully and completely, what we wish for and desire will *by the very nature of things* be according to the will and the desire of God. That is *true* freedom, the fruit of the second baptism, of the Holy Spirit of God.

As we continue our path towards Easter, may *both* of these baptisms bear fruit within us – the baptism which cleanses us and makes us worthy to stand before God, and that which inspires and energises us to see God and behold his Glory. And may the works of our own effort, to renew and make good our habits and patterns of life, be joined and made complete by the work within us of the Holy Spirit, that we may understand in new and deeper ways what it means, as Jesus expresses it a little later in John's Gospel, not only to *live*, but to do so *fully* (cf John 10.10).