

## Not Knowing

*St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw*

Second Sunday in Lent, Year A, 1st March 2026

*Genesis 12.1-4a, Psalm 121, Romans 4.1-5, 13-17, John 3.1-17*

***Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word,  
Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen***

*"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." John 3:8*

So here we are on day the twelfth day of our forty day journey through Lent – a journey in the pattern of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness after either being driven (Mark) or led (Luke and Matthew) by the Spirit to undergo a time of testing and formation, at time itself in the pattern of the 40 days of flood in Genesis and the 40 years of exile in Exodus. We may undergo a 40 year or 40 day type experience at any point in our lives, finding ourselves all at sea or alone in a vast desert. But in Lent, whether we are at some kind of turning point or need to better understand our situation or to simply find peace with what is before us, we can choose to intentionally enter the wilderness of our own heart. This is a special place if we can get there – free of human constructs and constraints, open and wild – and even though it may be unnerving and unfamiliar it is a place of freedom and possibility.

Today we first hear of Abram being told by the Lord to "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" Abram departs this place of safety at the age of 75. It is never too late it seems to go in search of a better place. Perhaps it becomes even more momentous with each passing year – as there is more and more to leave behind. Even though a blessing is promised, and as the psalm also assures us "The Lord will defend your going out and your coming in" (Psalm 121.8), a certain amount of bravery and also trust is required on the outward path to the unknown.

Paul in his letter to the Romans reflects on this belief – this trust, this faith - which was 'reckoned to [Abraham] as righteousness.'<sup>i</sup> The word *righteous* has come to be associated with self-righteousness – a moralistic belief in one's own perfection – but that is not what it means here – righteousness is understood by many to mean being in right-relationship with God, which is not a matter of rules but of love.<sup>ii</sup> Paul makes many complex arguments concerning the limitations of the law or even good works without the pure grace of this right relationship. He even says 'For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation' – not meaning we can abolish laws against murder and so on, but that club rules concerning ritual law and observance of special days and foods and so on can become what he later calls 'stumbling blocks' or mistaken as passes to right relationship rather than outward signs of it. We might also think of other norms of society that when applied without heart become stifling and confining. As Bill Loader sums up:

All this is Paul's way ... of saying: God's goodness manifest in Christ ... offers life to people in the death of alienation and lostness and makes possible the miracle of a new beginning. No priestly manipulations, no religious powerbrokers, no secret or ceremonial rites, no works prescribed in biblical law are required. It just needs us to believe in this love. Then something new begins as we are swept into a sphere of powerful transforming love and find ourselves joined together with other "growers" in that body of Christ, all on the way and together in an ongoing process of allowing the same goodness of God in Christ come to reality within and through us.<sup>iii</sup>

Turning to John's gospel we encounter Nicodemus who is beginning to catch onto this "goodness manifest in Christ." Nicodemus was a Pharisee which means "separated one" - the Pharisees were a movement that set themselves apart to study and teach the law. They were respected mainstream and influential leaders who established and codified the liturgy and ritual of the Rabbinic tradition. They come off badly in the New Testament but we need to remember that Jesus was not critical of the law itself or their beliefs, only of those hypocrites who made an outward show of piety, or were overly strict about outward forms while ignoring the soul of the tradition and the human heart.

The exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus takes place near the beginning of John's gospel – which does not include an account of Jesus in the wilderness, but moves directly from Jesus' baptism and gathering of the disciples, to the first miracle of turning water into wine at the Wedding at Cana. Then, immediately before today's text, Jesus makes a whip of cords and drives the moneylenders and those selling sacrificial animals out of the temple. Perhaps because of the outrage and controversy this has caused amongst the Pharisees, Nicodemus visits Jesus secretly by night. He wants to know more, even though his colleagues are rounding

against Jesus. He appears twice more in John's gospel – defending Jesus by appealing to the chief priests and his fellow Pharisees to remember that the law requires a person to be heard before being judged (John 7), and finally providing spices to assist Joseph of Arimathea prepare the body of Jesus after his crucifixion. (John 19) So Nicodemus, by visiting Jesus secretly, is beginning his own wilderness journey, stepping out from the known and safe-haven of the temple into the night.

What next for him? He begins by acknowledging what he has seen evidence of: “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.” But he is immediately challenged by Jesus – No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above – without being born of water and Spirit. It is not enough to witness what Jesus does and acknowledge that he comes from God, but he himself must also be born from above. What a mind-blowing concept - Nicodemus is astonished and uncomprehending. Jesus says we have no access to what the kingdom might mean unless we ourselves are born of the Spirit. All too often belief is presented in the abstract – as an objective truth that must be admitted *before* one can be ‘born again’ and receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus rejects this - be born of the spirit and *then* you will truly see. There is no 5 point step by step dot-pointed guide or plan as is so often presented. What does Jesus say?

*“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 all who are born of the Spirit”*

No prerequisites – just the free-flowing, excitingly unpredictable whisperings of pure grace. The release, the joy and the freedom of *not knowing* where it comes from or where it is going. There is a beautiful Leunig cartoon about leaves, each one an object lesson in the ways of life and love. One particularly weathered and tattered autumn leaf is captioned “I loved the wind. I had a wonderful relationship with the wind.” We will get a bit ruddy faced and ruffled and crumbly around the edges if we let the wind take us. How many of us by instinct go for a walk on the beach when life seems overwhelming as if the answer to our problems is blowing in the wind or will whisk them away. I remember one holiday long ago in wintry Melbourne, pondering some dilemma as I walked around the Botanic Gardens and coming across a Victorian era folly. It was on top of a hill overlooking the river – a circular dome-roofed structure with classical columns. I then saw with delight that it was called The Temple of the Winds. I stepped into it and for a while I stopped arguing with myself and, instead, tried to listen with an open heart for which direction the winds of change might blow.

So having breathed in the fresh air of the lively Spirit, we come to read that most familiar of verses ‘*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.*’ We might pause before zeroing in on the word *believes* or reading it as a transactional pre-condition – if you believe you will have eternal life. The Greek word *pisteuō* is more about a relationship of trust.<sup>iv</sup> In early Latin and English Bibles the word was perhaps more accurately translated as *believe into* – a phrase invented by the Greek writers of the New Testament and found in the early Latin and English Bibles.<sup>v</sup> First we were deeply loved and loved us in this way – by the gift and grace of God’s only Son – God’s goodness manifest in Christ for us, so all who *believe into* Christ – not believe something *about* him – but *believe into* Christ may have eternal life. Believe into: trust, lean into, move into Christ, become a part – a member of Christ.

To *believe into* Christ is not only about being in a right relationship of love, it is also to engage in a life-giving process – an ongoing eternal movement. The end point is the mystery of Christ, but as to what that might actually mean for us, for those we share the journey with, for our world – that is unknown and unscripted for those who have a wonderful relationship with the wind of the Spirit - *you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.* But we listen and we trust, and we let it carry us. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Romans 4.3 cf Gen15.6 and 4.9 cf Gen 15.6

<sup>ii</sup> Eg. <https://deepspirituality.com/jesus-redefines-righteousness-as-relationship>

<sup>iii</sup> William Loader, First Thoughts on Year A Epistle Passages from the Lectionary: Lent 2: Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 (<https://billloader.com/AEPLeLent2.htm>)

<sup>iv</sup> *It's All Greek to Me*, on Practical Theology Today: Conversations about Down-to-Earth Faith <https://practicaltheologytoday.com/tag/john-316>

<sup>v</sup> see Natalya A. Cherry, *Believing into Christ: Relational Faith and Human Flourishing*, Baylor University Press, 2021