

Lent 2 March 1st, 2026

Scripture text: John 3:1-21

I was listening to a radio programme recently regarding the mythical status of the Stradivarius violin. Such violins were created by Antonio Stradivari in Cremona, Italy, during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. They represent the high mark of violin making. In 2011 an anonymous buyer paid the record sum of \$15.9 million for a violin—named “Lady Blunt” after Lady Anne Blunt, one of its previous owners—which was considered by experts to be the second best-preserved of Stradivarius’s creations. However, a French researcher, intrigued by the mythical quality of these violins, decided to pit some of the Stradivarius violins against modern counterparts. She set up a research programme and sought to prove that the sounds of these historic violins were no different from ones created today. According to her research criteria she claimed to have proved her theory. This included blind testing of the violins with professional players.

“Of the 17 players, seven said they couldn't tell which were which and seven got it wrong. Only three got it right.

In terms of physics, we haven't found any differences, basically, between new and old Italian violins," she explains.¹

The summary of the research was that the old, mythical-status violins which reach millions of pounds were no better than their cheaper, contemporary versions.

Do you think her research has led to a sudden plummet in the value of these antique violins? Do violinists no longer want to play them?

Not at all – because human beings respond to story as much as to science. The story of these 17th century violins that one man made in his pioneering workshop, perfecting the art of violin making, and setting the standard for today – is a story that enables the violins to mean much more than just the pure sound they make. As humans we long for poetry, for romance, for art, for meaning, not just the

¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/05/08/527057108/is-a-stradivarius-violin-easier-to-hear-science-says-nope>

reduction of our human lives down to their constituent parts: 'the physics'. It follows that the Stradivarius violin is sought after and valued not just for its material properties but for the story and history that it carries- the history, craft and art of violin making. No violin today can carry that story so none can match the brilliance of the Stradivarius.

Like the story of the Stradivarius violin, and its extraordinary maker, to believe in God is to believe in another extraordinary creator. This extraordinary creator has not just made violins; he has crafted the entire universe. Like the wonder, magic and myth of playing the Stradivarius violin, to trust in God as creator, brings wonder, awe and deep meaning to our lives. Believers are made of just the same flesh and blood that non-believers are made of, but to trust we are crafted and made with love and purpose changes the tenor and quality of our lives.

If we relate this to the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus, we can notice the parallels. Jesus challenges Nicodemus with a

different narrative, an alternative framework for understanding reality. Nicodemus is encouraged, challenged, and invited to encounter an alternative truth about his existence. One that is full of mystery and surprise. Jesus speaks to Nicodemus not just about the everyday life of flesh and blood (the mechanics of existence, if you will) but the imaginative, spiritual life that exists alongside our material realities.

“What is born of the flesh is flesh, what is born of the spirit is spirit”.

“I tell you no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit”.

Despite being a religious leader, Nicodemus is ultimately confounded by what Jesus is telling him. He cannot enter into the spiritual dimension that Jesus is inviting him to explore. Rather, he focuses on the external truths as he understands them: “Can one enter a second

time into the mother's womb and be born?" he questions. Further, he comments, in amazement:

"How can these things be?"

Jesus mocks him for his lack of understanding, underlining his repeated frustrations with those who claim to be teachers of the faith:

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

Indeed, we could say that his status as a religious leader mitigates against him accepting the words of Jesus. Why? Jesus has his strongest words for those who hold authority over others. He holds them to very high standards. The learning of many of the religious leaders of the day is not used to enable people to receive life in its fullness (the tonal resonance of John's Gospel) but to judge, condemn, control and diminish others. Jesus is deeply frustrated with them because of this. And they in turn are deeply challenged

and threatened by Jesus's authority, his teaching and his general appeal among the crowds. This central conflict – between religious authority and Jesus - is at the heart of John's Gospel – and very quickly, even by chapter six, Jesus's life is at risk. The story of Nicodemus highlights the significance of this battle, because Nicodemus can't make his mind up about whose side he is really on.

Nicodemus, however, unlike many of his counterparts, is at least troubled and intrigued by Jesus. Troubled enough to seek him out at night for a one-to-one conversation. He cannot fully make the break away from his position and his colleagues, but he stays around on the edges, intrigued and fascinated by Jesus. His two other appearances in the Gospel highlight his in-between position.

In John 7: 50-51 Nicodemus challenges the temple priests who are seeking to arrest Jesus by saying: "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?". They mock him for it, saying: "Surely you are not also from

Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee” (John 7: 52). Nicodemus also appears, poignantly, after the death of Jesus. He brings a massive and expensive quantity of precious fragrances: ‘a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds’ (John 19: 39) and he tends to Jesus’s body, wrapping it in cloth and laying it in the tomb alongside Joseph of Arimathea. One but can’t wonder if he was too late.

As we consider the story of Nicodemus, we are given the opportunity to survey our own lives, our own discipleship. To consider the extent to which we are able to put our trust in God, and the extent to which we are still hedging our bets. Which story do we trust? Which story do we want to be a part of? I want to live in a world where the myth of a great violin maker feeds our search for beauty and wonder. I choose to believe in world where I am more than the sum of my parts. To trust that life is more than flesh and blood, and that I too can be born from above and shaped by the Spirit’s prompting. I place

my hope in a life filled with God's grace, where we become partakers
in the Spirit.

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