

Psalm 15
John 3:1-10

How can these things be?

As we watch the world fall apart around us, it is increasingly heard in the analyses of what is going on that we are seeing the end of the “rules-based order”.

We live according to rules – little (and not so little) expectations by which the world is a predictable, and so a *safe*, place. The rule might be which side of the road to drive on, which colours should and should not be worn together, how to place the bowls in the dishwasher, and who we can and can’t drop bombs on.

Of course, we have always experienced violations of the rules. Dishwashers have been poorly stacked, cars have run red lights, and terrorists have driven trucks into crowded night markets. But there’s generally been a sense that we at least agree that these *are* violations and that those who do such things should be shown to be wrong with punishments that signal rules-based normality.

But in what we see in headline places like Ukraine, Gaza and the US – and many other less well-known instances – the “rules” seem to have been violated in such a way as to deny the continuing applicability of the rules, the possibility of a return to “normal”. At the geopolitical level, those rules set in place by the establishment of the United Nations are crumbling. The bullies on the block were always there but were once more constrained. At the levels of local political and interpersonal relationships, there is a contemptuous edge to our interactions and a noticeable absence of restraint correlating to that on the international stage.

I’m not describing anything here you don’t already know, of course: we’ve all seen and felt this over the last decade or so, and the sense of a disruption of the rules of political relationships has been intensified by the pandemic and the growing awareness that Mother Nature is governed entirely by rules we *can’t* change, and crossing her will not end well for any of us.

The sense that there were rules in place might have been, of course, simply delusion. This is one of the critiques from the rule breakers: the rules were made by the powerful Western and liberal political system, which is itself now in decline. In this sense, they weren’t the *real* rules but only a temporary expression of one interest group’s order and advantage, which is now crumbling.

There’s a lot of analysis of all this to be found in the op-eds and longreads, and my purpose today is not to try to sift through all that to some “solution” to a return to order.

Instead, I wonder how we might think “Christianly” about what we are experiencing, how we might characterise what is going on and respond from a Christian perspective.

For this, let’s reference the disorientation of Nicodemus in his encounter with Jesus, and Nicodemus’ exasperated exclamation, “How can these things be?”, for John’s Gospel is the Gospel of the end of rules-based order.

Nicodemus knows something is going on with Jesus and so seeks him out, although “by night”, for such an approach is itself against the rules, and best done with stealth. The Jesus he finds specialises in non-sequiturs and answers to questions which haven’t been asked: “Very truly”, Jesus remarks, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being

born again” (or “from above”). While there is a simple metaphorical reading of this rebirth, John has Nicodemus taking it painfully literally: Jesus speaks nonsense.

Nicodemus’ literalism is important here, because a soft metaphorical hearing of the rebirth might see the central point lost in a weak spiritualism. The central point *is* that, for Jesus, none of the old rules apply. He speaks non-sense, which becomes clearer as he continues in response to Nicodemus with a pun on a (Greek) word which could be translated as “wind” or “spirit”: “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 wind” (or the s/Spirit).

The wind, so far as casual observers are concerned, follows no rules. If this wind – this *s/Spirit* – has any order, it is a non-rules-based order. We can’t tell what will happen next, where it will carry us. This is the *disordered* order Jesus announces as the order of the kingdom of God, the order by which the people of God are placed in the world.

Not surprisingly, Nicodemus responds in a way that anticipates our own experience of the disorder developing around us today: *How. Can These. Things. Be?*

We might recall what we’ve noted a couple of times lately about meaning – that meaning *is location*. Nicodemus asks, How does such disorder “fit” with everything else I know? Or, to put the same question around the other way, How or where do *I* fit within such disorder?

This is a question about predictability, security, safety. When I know what and where I am, and what is happening around me, I’m best placed to survive life’s ordeals. In such circumstances, meaning abounds. But there is none of this for Nicodemus here. The cover of darkness under which he sought to discover how Jesus fits now reveals another kind of darkness: that of the uncertainty, the unfittingness, of the wind, of the *s/Spirit*.

Nicodemus approaches the strange-looking Jesus from the perspective of a rules-based order. But as he seeks to understand, he finds that he can’t fit Jesus in, which intensifies the disorder Jesus seems to be.

It is, of course, the rules-based order of the religious and political leadership that finally kills Jesus: “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God”. This is how the religious leaders advise Pilate at Jesus’ trial (19.7).

And, again “of course”, Jesus’ death is central to the theme of salvation in Christian confession. It’s just a little beyond what we heard this morning that the well-known “John 3.16” appears: This is the love of God, that he gave his only Son – this “giving” being in Jesus’ death (3.14).

But what does this salvation look like? Do we think it takes the form of a reordering, a reestablishment of the rules? Is salvation moral clarity and observance, the world now behaving as it should, according to the rules?

That’s perhaps the “standard” way of thinking about what being “saved” means. But if those whom Jesus saves are to become like Jesus himself, then being “born again” is not about being delivered from damnation into a blessed and well-ordered world (into “heaven”, as we usually name it). Salvation is about becoming unruly Jesus-like people, of whom it is said, “How can such things – how can such *people* – be: disordered, born of the wind?”

This deeply and richly human disorder is not like the disorder we see playing out on the world stage. Worldly disorder is never really disordered. The violent are never *merely* violent; they always justify their violence by appealing to rules which blame the victim: look what you made me do.

Look what you made us do, Ukraine. Look what you made us do, you Aborigines, you Gazans, you Jews, you refugees, you “coloured” person, you who are weak and vulnerable, you everyone-who-is-not-a-United-States-of-American. How could we *not* have done what we have done? The ever-present, violent disorder of the world is always based on an appeal to some deeper rule that the violent claim justifies the violence. Later in John’s Gospel, the high Priest Caiaphas will declare, It is better that one die, than that everything be lost: Look what you made us do, you disordering Jesus.

This is all to say that the alleged breakdown of our rule-based order might just be the displacement of one rules-based violence with another, of a convenient violence with a less convenient one.

Against all this, the disorder of the “born again” or “born from above” Jesus speaks about is an abandonment of those orderings of the world which violate human being in the name of order.

The disorder of the wind, of the Spirit of Christ, is not a random and capricious thing. It is love’s insistence on rejecting the violent and self-interested orderings of the world. The disorder of the Spirit is grace, in place of the harsh claims of justice. It is abundance, in the face of economically ordered scarcity. It is unruly gift, in place of carefully calculated exchange.

In the end, Nicodemus’ “How can these things be?” is turned around: the problem is not that Jesus doesn’t fit; it is that Nicodemus’ well-ordered, good-fitting world limits and constrains and kills – even Jesus himself.

And so the question becomes, How can it be that – again and again in echo of the cynical Caiaphas – we reject the free and freeing life in the wildly unruly Jesus?

This is the love of God: that he gave...love. God’s gift is not “salvation” in some future time and place. God’s gift is life: life *as* love. This is a gift that doesn’t fit our sense of order and is precisely what we need in the midst of our rules-based orderings of ourselves and each other.

Though it seems that the rules are breaking down, they are really only re-adjusting. And what is required of us now is what has always been required: recognition that someone is always crushed by the rules and acting in love to set them free. This is what it means to be reborn, to be born from above, to be born of the gusty Spirit.

With the stunned Nicodemus, we wonder about the God who doesn’t fit, who seems to have no meaning, who disrupts our order: “How can these things *be*?”

God replies, If you are to know the truth, and be set free for life in all its fullness, How could these things *not* be?
