

Bible Reading for May 27, 2018 – Trinity Sunday

John 3:1-17

3 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

3 Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

4 “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

5 Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

9 “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

The Trinity – The Kind of God We Didn’t Want!¹

It is so easy for us, as arrogant individuals, to create “God” in our own image. Such a god will not only agree with us on everything, but would do whatever we wanted this god to do for us. This deity would get us that perfect job and that ideal life partner, make us - and those we love - continually happy, and keep us perpetually healthy, and so on. Such a god only reinforces our own pride and prejudice. The net result is that we become “God,” and this god we have made is merely our puppet. This kind of “God” is simply a projection of our own desires and is actually an Idol. All idols start out life as the God that somebody wanted, and that includes money, sex, and power, and not just little objects some people worship.

On this particular day of the year, Trinity Sunday, we celebrate the God we didn’t want, the God we would never have dreamed of, but who, amazingly, wanted us. Trinity Sunday is the day that we stand back from the extraordinary sequence of events that we’ve been celebrating for the last five months, from Advent to Pentecost, and once we have rubbed the sleep from our eyes, we discover what the word “God” might actually mean. The doctrine of the Trinity is *not* a God made in our own image. The Trinitarian God doesn’t fit neatly into our little categories. If God did, God wouldn’t be God at all, merely the little idol that we have always wanted. The Trinity is not some clever Church doctrine that claims that we have worked it all out and that we know everything about God. Rather, the doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that there is always an element of mystery to God. One author, borrowing from Winston Churchill, claims that many today view the Trinity as “a riddle wrapped up inside a puzzle and buried in an enigma.”² While there is some truth to this witty remark, this does not mean that we can wrap everything up as “mystery” to accept by “faith” and simply leave it at that. That, to some extent, is what “spirituality” is all about, so making an idol out of the act of “faith” itself. Instead, the great Protestant theologian of the last century, Karl Barth, viewed the Trinity not as a puzzle that needs solving, but an explanatory framework which sets theology in its proper perspective, and thus offers solutions to *its* problems and riddles.³ In other words, let us begin with the Trinity – God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – a communion of beings-in-relationship united in purpose, fellowship, and love, and from *that* starting point address all the issues of life, including the complex problem of evil and suffering. What we discover is that the Trinity is passionate and compassionate towards us. The Christian God is not a seemingly absent deity, but One who was given himself *totally* to this world in sacrificial love, who comes and rescues his creation, and gives us new life. That is what John 3 is all about. This may not be the kind of God the world wants, but it is kind of God our world needs.

John is a master craftsman in retelling the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus and making it a teachable moment for his readers. This story is appropriate for Trinity Sunday because it weaves together the loving God who gave Jesus to the world with the life-giving Holy Spirit. The story ends with two verses that are some of the most memorable lines in Scripture. However, the language and

¹ I acknowledge N. T. Wright for the introduction to this sermon from: *For all God’s Worth* (Eerdmans), chapter 3.

² Leupp, *Knowing the Name of God*, 16.

³ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 253.

imagery are more complex than one might imagine at first glance, since an intelligent man like Nicodemus fails to understand the words that John puts into the mouth of Jesus.

Nicodemus was a devout religious leader who was also a member of the highest legislative and judicial body amongst the Jews.⁴ John begins his account by emphasizing that Nicodemus fails to recognize *who* Jesus really is – just like many of the Jewish leaders of the day, and many people today for that matter. Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus is “a *teacher* who has come from God because no one could perform the miraculous signs that he did and less God was with him.”⁵ Nicodemus therefore recognizes Jesus as a *prophet* - a messenger authorized by God. Given who Nicodemus was, that was a profound and surprising admission. But John’s point is that Jesus is more than just a prophet, he is the Messiah, and he was not merely raised *up* by God, but came down *from* God – the divine “Word made flesh,” as we often hear at Christmastime.⁶

Jesus then replies to Nicodemus with the peculiar riddle: “I tell you the solemn truth; unless a person is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God.”⁷ This familiar phrase is stunning! Nicodemus, like all Jews, regarded themselves as God’s chosen people simply by the fact they were born from a Jewish mother. “Are you saying that this Jewish pedigree is *not* guaranteed admission into the kingdom of God?” asks Nicodemus. “No it isn’t,” says Jesus, “The identity or status of one’s earthly parents makes no difference whatsoever as far as a person’s relationship with God is concerned. Flesh gives birth to flesh; it takes the divine Spirit to give birth to spirit.” Since we are not Jewish, we naturally embrace this inclusive message of Jesus that would have been so troubling for Nicodemus. But we also need to be careful, because *we* sometimes cling on to *our* Christian heritage as if *it* provided entry into the kingdom of God. We might exclaim: “My parents were missionaries, or my granddad was an Elder, my aunt is a Sunday School teacher,” and so we try to hang on to *their* coat-tails to automatically enter the kingdom. Others’ simply say, “I was baptised as a baby,” as if that were the entrance ticket. “It doesn’t work like that Nicodemus,” says Jesus, “You must be born from above,” which is also commonly translated as being “born anew” or “born again.” John, writing in Greek, uses a word [*anōthen*] that has a *double meaning*: you must be born “from above” *and* you must be “born anew.” Bible translators recognize the problem: there isn’t a similar word in English with such a double meaning, and – curiously - neither was there a corresponding word in Aramaic, the language Jesus would have spoken! Appreciating the dramatic irony in John’s wordplay provides, I think, powerful insights to his overall message. Just as there is more than one meaning to the word John uses, and *both* are *necessary*, so there is more to life than *physical* reality; there is a *spiritual* dimension that is vitally important if we want to be fully alive.

Nicodemus assumes only the physical meaning, focusing on being “born anew,” and recognizes the physical impossibility of re-entering the womb for that to happen. He is therefore stuck in a two-dimensional “flatland.” He needs to perceive a new dimension - a third dimension: “from above.”

⁴ He was a wealthy Pharisee *and* a member of the elite Sanhedrin; see also: John 7:45-52; 19:39-42.

⁵ John 3:2.

⁶ John 1:1-5, 14-18.

⁷ John 3:3; see also John 1:12-13.

Experiencing the kingdom of God does not arise by *illumination*, says Jesus, but through *regeneration* by the Holy Spirit.

Now Nicodemus was an expert in the Old Testament, he would have known all about the prophecies, such as the one I mentioned last week from Ezekiel, “I will give you a *new heart* and put a *new spirit* in you . . . and give you a heart of flesh.”⁸ Was Nicodemus therefore stubbornly refusing to get the point, or was he genuinely confused? We will never know, of course! John then gives a little proverbial commentary on the implications of being born of the Spirit, again employing Greek wordplay using the word *pneuma* to talk of both “spirit” and “wind.”

“The wind blows wherever it will, and you hear the sound it makes, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”⁹

Last Sunday was Pentecost and we saw from Luke’s account of the birthday of the church similar images of an unpredictable blowing wind giving new life in surprising ways.¹⁰ Rebirth is a spiritual experience that is available to all, but perhaps most needed by religious people, like Nicodemus, who might think that they don’t need it. That is because “religion” often becomes a matter of the correct observance of particular practices, like Holy Communion. When these practices become routine, they may actually serve to hinder spiritual sensitivity. What is really needed is a radical *transformation* of our whole way of knowing and experiencing the world. It is not about *seeing* things differently using human reason, but about *becoming* a new being – or a new creation, as St. Paul would put it – which can *only* be a work of God or “from above.” When this happens, it is as if we have begun life all over again. Putting it differently, it is not just about the *fact* of baptism, but of *living out* what that baptism means!

As John moves on in his teachable moment he says, somewhat cryptically, no one has *ascended* into heaven except the One who *descended* from heaven¹¹ – the Son of Man, referring to another prophecy in Daniel 7. In Jewish thinking at that time, Moses was thought to have ascended to heaven to receive the Ten Commandments and then descended again to distribute it to the people. In contrast to those Jewish legends, John reminds his readers that Jesus is the *only* person who has made a genuine *ascent* to heaven, an event that happened *after* the resurrection - remembering that [for John] Jesus first *descended* from heaven in the incarnation, when he was born.¹² John is emphasizing the ongoing *relationship* between God and humankind and his freedom to communicate, whether that is through prophets, or angels, or whether God comes directly as Jesus - the Son of Man. Jesus therefore *knows* all about heavenly things, says John.

This implied reference to Moses and talk of ascension prompts John to make reference to a number of physical acts of *raising*. Moses *lifted up* the bronze serpent on a stick so that anyone who looked at

⁸ Ezek 36:26-27; see also Heb 8:10; Jer 31:33. Recall too the Spirit of God bring the dry bones back to life; Ezek 37:1-14.

⁹ John 3:8.

¹⁰ See Acts 2.

¹¹ John 3:13.

¹² John 1:1-5, 14-18.

God's provision for healing would be made whole.¹³ The writer of the Wisdom of Solomon felt it necessary to remind his Jewish audience that it wasn't the bronze serpent itself that saved the Israelites, but the saving power *of God*, a text Nicodemus would have known.¹⁴ In the same way, Christ's ascension is a *continual process* that begins with Jesus being physically *lifted up* on the cross at his crucifixion, to Christ being *raised* from the dead in the resurrection, and finally, being *exulted* back to God in heaven. Nevertheless, the source of our salvation is not the physical cross itself, but the Trinitarian God, and this is expressed in one of the most well-known verses in the New Testament:

“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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”¹⁵

It is here that we read of the lavish, limitless, love of God that embraces the whole cosmos. God gave his unique, “one-of-a-kind” Son so that whoever believes in God's chosen Messiah will be born of the Spirit - and so will enjoy the fullness of life, as defined by God - not by humans. The life the Spirit gives is the intimate, unending presence of God - not everlasting human existence. It is a life that begins *now*, not in the future after we die.¹⁶ In short, the Trinity's action plants a sign in the middle of history, which says: “believe and live.”

This reveals just how much our Trinitarian God cares for creation. God is *not* distant or disinterested, but intimately involved in history—in our suffering world. It also emphasizes that the Father, Son, and Spirit are continually working *together*; this self-giving God who rescues us from ourselves is the *kind* of God we need! All this challenges our view of God, just as it did for Nicodemus. It's not that Nicodemus was totally wrong; it's just that he had an incomplete picture because he was trying to understand *heavenly* things in an *earthly* way. Instead we should be sensitive to the Holy Spirit so as to make sense of *earthly things* in a *heavenly way*.

The evangelist wants all his readers – including us - to be *challenged* and *changed* by his story, to respond to this kind of God. Being born anew *and* being born from above, comes about with our recognition that the full character of God is revealed in Jesus. That Jesus is the very image of God, not merely a good teacher, and he is God's gift given *to* the world *from* a God who passionately *loves* the world. This God demonstrates a love that knows no bounds and only asks that we *receive* the gift – something we re-live when we receive Holy Communion – and then pass on the gift to others.

In conclusion, abundant life comes through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit; it is not a work of human effort or wisdom. As you look to the future don't focus on merely earthly things and only think in a 2-dimensional flatland. Instead, seek heavenly things too and recognize things as they really are – in 3 dimensions. Look forward in hope; focus on the One who was lifted up for the whole world, for he is the gateway to life in all its fullness. AMEN.

¹³ John 3:14; Num 21:5–8; 2 Kings 18:4.

¹⁴ Wisdom of Solomon 16:7.

¹⁵ John 3:16-17.

¹⁶ “Everlasting (or ‘abundant’ – John 10:10) life” and the “kingdom of God” are very closely connected themes in John.