

5.30.2021 Trinity Sunday (John 3:1-15)

“There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto Him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with Him” (John 3:1-2).

Our Gospel reading on this Trinity Sunday is the account of Nicodemus, a Pharisee who came to Jesus at night, with the desire to ask Him many questions. In Nicodemus we realize there were honest Pharisees, men who were eager to hear and consider Jesus in a fair way. Nicodemus had heard about the miraculous signs, he knew that Jesus was no ordinary Rabbi, and he was ready to listen to His message. Nicodemus’ greeting indicates that he thought of Jesus as a man of God, a *“teacher come from God.”* In time, the Holy Spirit would convince Nicodemus that Jesus is God, the Divine, Eternal Second Person of the Holy Trinity.

Jesus responded to Nicodemus’ greeting by telling him that the Kingdom of God comes by way of a new birth. Jesus said to him, *“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”* (John 3:3). We’ve heard the term “born again Christian” so frequently that we don’t stop to consider aspects of birth that should come to mind when we hear Jesus speak these words. For example, birth is an activity that isn’t initiated by the person being born. Years before the day of our birth, none of us made the phone calls necessary to set up our parents on their first date. We had no choice as to where or how they’d meet, or when dad would finally muster up the courage to propose to mom. We didn’t plan our own baby shower or pick the hospital where we’d be born. Even when the pregnancy came to full term and we were ready to live outside our mother’s body, still we didn’t choose to leave the womb, but relied on our mother to push us out.

Likewise, our entry into the Kingdom of God isn’t a process that’s initiated by us. We rely completely on the grace of God for this new birth. Our condition after the fall of Adam is such that we can’t turn to faith by our own natural strength (Article X). Jesus said, *“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws them...”* (John 6:44). So, thanks be to God for our salvation, for He spared not His own Son, and through new birth brought us out of the darkness of the womb and into the light of an entirely new

existence.

Nicodemus struggled with the idea of being born into the Kingdom of God. Jesus was using the image of birth in a way he didn't understand. So he asked, "*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit*" (John 3:4-6). With these words, Jesus defines the fundamental difference between the natural birth that brings us into this world, and the super-natural birth that brings us into the Kingdom of God.

If Nicodemus were to enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, it would just be another birth into this world, for *that which is born of the flesh is flesh*. He'd still be, as St. Paul states in Ephesians, dead in "*trespasses and sins*" (Ephesians 2:1). We are all born the first time into this broken world, but our Savior Christ introduces a different birth, a baptismal "*birth of water and of the Spirit.*" This is the birth He describes when He says, "*That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*" Holy Baptism is our birth into the Kingdom of God.

Jesus compared His teaching about this new birth to the wind. He said, "*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, 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 3:8 ESV). Even today, with all the satellite and weather forecasting technology, there's still a lot about the weather that we can't predict and don't understand. With these words, Jesus is telling Nicodemus that he doesn't need to completely understand this new birth any more than he completely understands the blowing of the wind. It is enough to *hear its sound*, to feel it on your skin, to witness the effects of its power, and to believe that the Holy Spirit provides this new birth as the entry into the Kingdom of God.

Nicodemus is still struggling to keep up with Jesus. He honestly admits his confusion by asking, "*How can these things be?*" (John 3:9). His question indicates his confusion and the respect he has for our Lord. Rather than give up in frustration and leave, Nicodemus continues to trust Jesus to teach him, and Jesus does so by revealing the cause of the problem. He said, "*Art thou a*

master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness” (John 3:10-11). Nicodemus is struggling because he resists the testimony of Jesus and the prophets who came before Him. The teachings of Moses, the writings of the prophets, and the psalms all point forward to our Lord, to the Messiah. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus has most of these writings memorized, he’s heard them, he’s taught them, but he hasn’t received them, and this is the point in their conversation in which Jesus invites him to do so, by sharing the Gospel with Nicodemus.

Jesus said, *“And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life”* (John 3:13-15). In these verses, Jesus identifies Himself as the only Remedy for sin and death and all that separates us from God. He says to Nicodemus, He says to us, look and be saved, look and live, lift up the eyes of your faith to Christ crucified. Look to the One who came down from heaven and took on human flesh, the Son of God and the Son of man, for the work that He was given by the Father, He completed on the Cross and now *“whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved”* (Romans 10:13). God the Father perfectly manifested His love for the world through God the Son by the power of God the Holy Spirit. This is the Gospel.

The message our Lord shared with Nicodemus is the Good News that He commands us to *“Go”* and share with the world that He gave His life to save, and we know that, in the end, Nicodemus heard and received this message, because the account of him in today’s Gospel is not the last time we read about him in Scripture. Shortly after Jesus died on the cross, we hear about Nicodemus one last time. St. John wrote, *“And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight”* (John 19:38-39). There were honest Pharisees, and isn’t it interesting that two of these Pharisees supervised the burial of Jesus in the tomb?

Nicodemus came to Jesus with questions, and received a lesson on the Trinity. Jesus taught him that God the Father shows His love for us by sending His only begotten Son into the world. He taught that, God the Son, like the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness, would be raised up on the Cross in order to save the world from sin and death. Jesus taught that, God the Holy Spirit offers the gift of salvation to us by giving us a new birth into the family of God, and by this new birth, as reconciled and adopted children of God, we receive all the blessings that our gracious Triune God desires to give us, including forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life.

Nicodemus, an honest Pharisee, came to Jesus with many questions, and the answers he received led him to faith in our Savior Christ. By the grace of God may we bring our questions to the Lord in prayer, to the end that our faith may be strengthened and shared with the world that the Father, through the Spirit, gave the life of His Son to save.