

John 3:1-17 (Holy Trinity)

This Sunday is celebrated by many as Trinity Sunday. People have tried to explain what the Trinity means and, what it doesn't mean. What's your favourite way of talking about the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer; Presence, Wisdom, Power; or perhaps Womb of life, Word in Flesh, Brooding Spirit? All of these phrases have been used to refer to the Trinity, yet they all refer to God.

Have you ever tried to explain the Trinity? Or even to understand it? God is one and yet we've got these three, these three what? Persons? Spirits? Beings? Things? So what is God? A triangle, maybe a prism, but with three sides? Maybe God is like the Greek God Janus, the one with two faces, except that the Christian God has three faces. Or maybe God is a shape-shifter, one minute holy parent, another holy child, another holy spirit. Defining the Trinity is not easy.

Jesus didn't talk about the Trinity; neither did Paul, but they did talk quite extensively about Spirit. For Isaiah, Spirit got him moving and participating in God's work again. For Paul, Spirit told us something important about who we really were, that we didn't know before. With Nicodemus, Jesus did not speak of himself but of Spirit, which birthed the spirit in us. Spirit works personally, intimately in our lives, revealing more of who we are meant to be in the world. It is Spirit who makes holistic sense and meaning out of God and Jesus. Spirit with no definite article in front of it is the name of the third person of the Holy Trinity.

It wasn't until the fourth century, 300 years after Jesus, that Christian leaders formalized the idea of the Trinity following the ongoing arguments about whether Jesus was human or divine. They did it at the Council of Nicaea in 325. The result? The Nicene Creed. Then some other Christian leaders in the fifth century wrote another creed trying once again to clarify the Trinity, particularly the Jesus part. That Council resulted in the Apostles' Creed. But what exactly do these old councils, creeds and conflicts have to do with how

we live our lives today. Probably not much.

It's these kind of perplexing questions that might be exactly where Nicodemus' thoughts were headed that night on the roof with Jesus. He'd just come for a little dialogue, but he ended up with many more questions than answers from Rabbi Jesus. Nicodemus is very curious about Jesus. Little wonder. Jesus has caused quite a stir. His actions in the Temple were unheard of, yet his signs and wonders, as Nicodemus confesses, testify that he has come from God, and so Nicodemus comes to question Jesus, to learn more about him and to make his own decision about him.

At the start of their nocturnal interview, Jesus was patient. What it all boiled down to, Jesus told Nicodemus, was that unless you were born again, or born from above, you might as well give up. Born from above? Born Again? Nicodemus is unable to think beyond established categories. Having already exited the womb, he wonders how it is possible for a person to have another birth. Nicodemus appears rather wooden in this thinking, but manages to ask the obvious question, which was: How?

Hadn't Nick already been born once? Why be born again? And how does one get born again anyway? How were you supposed to pull it off if you were pushing sixty-five? How did you get born again when it was a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning? He even got a little sarcastic. Could one "enter a second time into the mother's womb?" he asked.

A story is told about a little girl who was asked to write an essay on "birth." When she got home after school, she asked her mother how she had been born. Her mother, who was busy at the time, said: 'the stork brought you darling, and left you on the doorstep.'

Continuing her research she asked her dad how he'd been born. Being in the middle of something, her father similarly deflected the question by saying, 'I was found at the bottom of the garden. The fairies brought me.'

Then she went and asked her grandmother how she had arrived. 'I was picked from a gooseberry bush', said grandmother. Putting together all the information the poor child had gathered, she proceeded to write her essay. Later, when the teacher asked her to read her essay in front of the class, she stood up and began, "There has not been a single natural birth in our family for three generations..."

When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus of being born from above, or being born anew, he was not talking about a natural birth. As he tried to explain to Nicodemus, what he was talking about was a spiritual birth - a birth that was - and is - somehow - supernatural. "Very truly, I tell you", Jesus said, "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is Spirit..."

And what's this business about being born of the Spirit? "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things," Jesus asks?

Frustrated though he might have been by these mysterious things that Jesus was saying, Nicodemus stayed. He stayed on that roof and listened to everything Jesus said. In the end, he was rewarded by being the first person in all of Scripture to hear that gem of Jesus' teachings, the kernel of the Gospel: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." If he didn't understand anything else Jesus had said, surely, he could understand this bit about God's love being for everyone. Who-so-ever, Jesus said, who-so-ever!

Today, as we observe Holy Trinity Sunday, it might be an appropriate time to think about our unnatural birth, and about the mystery that is involved in it; the mystery of God, the God who made us and gave us our first birth and breath, the God who saves us, by becoming one with us, dying with us and for us, the God who lives and works in us and gives us our second, our unnatural birth.

Our experience of God is marvellous and mysterious. It is like looking at the picture of an old hag and a young woman. There is one reality and yet there is more than one reality. And so it is with God. We know the God who is high and lifted up in his temple, the God who speaks and brings forth all of creation, the God who is judge, lord, ruler, sovereign, the God who is inaccessible, hidden from our eyes. This God is beyond us. This God we dare not touch even though we know this God and he knows us, even though we see this God's signs all around us, in the earth, the wind, the air, and fire.

And then we have the God who is in Christ; the God who is Christ; the God who is lowly and humble; the God who reaches out and touches others; the God who serves others; the God who walks the earth with us, cries and laughs with us; the God who calls God Abba, Father, Daddy; the God who is tempted with us; the God who hungers and thirsts with us; the God who embraces us and encourages us; the God who surrenders himself to death for us, having only the promise and the hope of being raised again.

And we have and know God the Spirit: God the bringer of visions and of dreams; God the source of strength and of hope; God the supplier of healing words and of comfort-filling prayer; God the wind, the breath, the air we breathe; God the transformer, the one who gives new birth, new life; God the presence within us and the presence all around us; God calling to us, calling for us, calling through us, calling in us. We are the children of God, says Paul. When we cry Abba, Father, it is the Spirit of God bearing witness with our Spirit that we are children of God; and if children then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. We suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

As Christians, we never know all that there is to know about God. God is always greater than our knowledge of him. But, we do know what God has shown us about himself. We do know God in three ways, three different ways. We experience him in three ways. We love him in three ways.

CS Lewis in his book "Mere Christianity," tries to describe part of this experience, this three-fold knowing, this three-fold loving in his description of a Christian at prayer. He writes: "What I mean is this. An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get into touch with God. But if he is a Christian he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also knows that all real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God - that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying, the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on, the motivating power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. The whole threefold life of the three-personal Being is actually going on in that ordinary act of prayer."

What so many people lack in their lives is a sense of the mystery of God and of the mystery of the life that God gives to them. We keep trying to develop one simple mental picture of God - one simple portrait of what our life in God is like or ought to be like. Most of us like to think that things are either black or white. And we will go to incredible lengths to fit things around us into one or the other category. But, God is greater than any category, any system of thought or classification, and so is our life in him.

God is just and holy, demanding perfect obedience. Yet, God is merciful and forgiving, willing to forgive unto the seventh generation. We are all sinners, unworthy to touch the hem of the robe worn by Christ. Yet, we are all children of God, intimately acquainted with his Spirit, joint heirs with the Son of all the riches of heaven. Our God is a mystery, and the life that our God gives to us is a mystery. But, because God, within that mystery touches us, it is mystery that can be experienced, savoured and known.

When we become Christians, when we yield ourselves to the outrageous claims of Jesus: his claim to be the Son of God; his claim to be the way, the truth and the life; his claim to be in the Father and the Father in him; something happens to our lives. Our vision begins to change.

We begin to see new things in the world around us. We begin to see the hand of God in the lives of people around us, stirring them up. We begin to sense that God was reaching out to people and calling them to himself. We begin to sense that God is in people, struggling to convince them of the beauty that is in them. We begin to see the world as a magical place, full of enchantment, full of purpose and of meaning. And we begin to feel compulsions to do things that we had never done before: the compulsion to pray for others; the compulsion to tell others that God is all around them; the compulsion to suddenly stop in the midst of turmoil and to thank God for little things; or simply to take a breath and savour the fact that in it is some divine purpose too deep for words.

And we begin to experience within ourselves, a growing peace, a peace that continues to grow. And we begin to experience in others: their struggles and their joys; their sufferings and their triumphs; the working of the God that is in our lives. Our life is not natural, and we thank God for it. What we experience now is not something that came to us as the result of our first birth, nor did we learn it somehow by attending a particular school. Nor did we learn it by living a better life than most other people around us. It was the result of coming to believe in God and in his Son, and asking him to be our God, our personal God in the way Jesus taught.

All believers have this experience; all who hunger and thirst for righteousness; all who yearn for God are satisfied. All experience grace. All sense the giftedness of their lives. All know the incredible miracle of the indwelling God. All know that they are born from above and, as in their first birth, the birth by water, they know it is totally miraculous, totally the work, the labour of another.

And as believers, as a result of our experience, we come to see that the words of the bible about God are true in every respect. We come to see that God has revealed himself and continues to reveal himself in many ways. And that the way that the Scriptures describe God, the way that God is described as three, yet one, the way that shows God as creator, redeemer, and

sustainer, the way that speaks of God as Father, and as Son and as Holy Spirit, the way that describes God as being a loving parent, a dear brother, a caring presence, is the true way, the life, the giving way.

That is all part of the truth that Jesus spoke of when he spoke to Nicodemus, who had a hard time grabbing hold of that truth. He couldn't quite understand how one could be born anew. It didn't seem natural to him, and it isn't natural. It is divine. It is the gift of God - the Father/Mother, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In effect, Jesus said: "Birth is a gift. Eternal life is a gift. Your ability to see the kingdom of God - why that's a gift. That is to say, faith is a gift, a new kind of birth from the womb of our Mother who art in heaven. So it is, with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

In his striving for faith, Nicodemus wants to know how this can be. He is grabbing for what can only be received as a gift of grace. The good news is that all of his questions, all of his doubts, all of his pursuits of faith, are caught up in the Wind, covered by the sound of a fierce, holy breeze howling in the dark.

Out in a dark world, if you listen, you can hear the Wind of God's Spirit groaning with the sound of grace, blowing wild and free. If you look, really look, sometimes you'll notice that wherever the Spirit blows, one by one, God's would-be believers are brought to life.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE FOR TRINITY SUNDAY May 24, 2024

Holy, holy, holy God, in calling forth Creation from the void, revealing yourself in human flesh, and pouring forth your wisdom to guide us, you manifest your concern for your whole universe. You invite us, as your people, to gather the world's needs into our hearts and bring them before you.

For the Church: that we may recognize our call as children of God, be united in fellowship through the Holy Spirit and encourage one another as we follow God's call in our lives. For a spirit of wonder and awe: that we may behold the marvellous deeds of God in nature, in relationships, and within ourselves and be motivated to serve God with greater faithfulness and sincerity ... Come, Holy Spirit.

For new vision and understanding: For a deeper appreciation of God's covenant of love: that we who were once "no people" have become God's own and that we may live each day as siblings and children of God: For peace: that God will bring new courage to leaders of nations working for peace and ending injustice, especially in Ukraine, Russia, Gaza, Israel, Sudan and Haiti ... Come, Holy Spirit.

For the grace to live in peace and harmony: that God will help us accept and appreciate the differences in one another, understand and value the diversity of gifts that others bring, and give us patience as we strive to work together. For a new experience of grace and mercy in our lives: that God's love will free us from our past failures, give us courage to make amends, and hope to begin again in our relationships ... Come, Holy Spirit.

For all who are isolated from God and the human family: that they may experience welcome and acceptance as they encounter the Christian community. For a greater sense of community: that we may appreciate the

wonder of each person and work together to address the needs and longings of all who enter our lives ... Come Holy Spirit.

For all who are discouraged, lonely, suffering, struggling with substance abuse or living with ill health, especially Pastor Kristin Steele; that the Spirit of God's love will strengthen them and bring them to wholeness quickly. For all whose lives are disrupted by violence: For all who have lost homes and community and become refugees: that God will protect them, guide them to food and shelter and help them rebuild their lives and develop new, supportive relationships ... Come Holy Spirit.

For those who are awaiting word that they may return to their communities after the recent wildfires in BC, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. Give them patience and fill them with hope that together they will work together to rebuild their communities and lives ... Come Holy Spirit.

For all congregations, including Peace Luther in Abbotsford and Pr. Dean Anderson, Emmaus Lutheran in Burnaby and Pr. Timo Saarinen, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanze and Pastor Ana Maria Jara; For Bishops Anna, Linda, Susan and Kathy and newly re-elected Jason, all for all pastors, priests, deacons, musicians and lay leaders, that the Holy Spirit inspire and encourage them. Come Holy Spirit.

For all who hunger. Extreme hunger and starvation now affect 350 million human beings worldwide, with 49 million on the brink of famine. 49 million! Hunger brought on by climate change, by war, by failure of humanity to share our resources equitably. We lift up before you the nations of this world with the greatest food insecurity: Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Gaza, Haiti, Mali, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. We lift up the millions in danger of starvation In South Africa, following an El Nino-caused drought which has destroyed any hope of harvest. Help all countries to be

generous in providing their aid response to the many in need. Come Holy Spirit.

Holy, holy, holy God, fill us with strength and courage, with discernment and compassion, that we may be your instruments of justice and love in this world, that it may be on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen

God in Community, Holy in One, make us one Body from many as we pray as Jesus taught us, saying,

Our Father ...