

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It can be a bit disconcerting to discover that the Gospel for Trinity Sunday is the story of Nicodemus and his well-known conversation with Jesus. How do we connect these two seemingly disparate worlds --- these two apparently unrelated stories? Well, in considering all of this, I came upon the interesting perspective of a vicar at St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London, a world-famous parish and one which is at the very heart of the Anglican communion. Here is how The Rev. Richard Carter views this question; I found it helpful.

When you take a journey, he says, there are three different aspects of what you are undertaking: (1) looking down at your feet, (2) talking to people along the way, and (3) looking out at the view as you travel. And all three are important. Indeed, one might say that they are all integral to the activity. And we see each of these elements in the story of Nicodemus. He comes to see Jesus in the dark because he is watching his feet. He wants to meet Jesus, but he is careful with his steps. Where will this path lead? What will others say if he is seen by his colleagues? He has made a choice, but it is one that can get him into trouble. So, the challenge begins in the dialogue with Jesus.

Nicodemus politely addresses Jesus as a rabbi in God's service. "With his perfunctory greeting, he is like one who tries to fill up a canyon with reverberating echoes: the noise has no substance." Jesus doesn't even acknowledge what Nicodemus has said because "merely calling Jesus a good rabbi is woefully inadequate." Though attempting to show respect, he finds that he is drawn into a lively discussion for which he is ill-prepared. He is fascinated but unsure, pulled and yet pulling back, wanting to enter an encounter and yet anxious of others' opinions and what this journey entails. He is looking down at his feet. He is talking to those around him or imagines what those conversations would be like as he embarks on this adventure. And he becomes confused and disoriented by his encounter with Jesus. He makes the journey and is transformed by it and yet at the same time remains unchanged, unwilling to take all of it in and internalize it because it has stretched him beyond where he is willing to go at the moment. "Commendable is his seeking out Jesus, but lamentable is his response."

And the Trinity is a bit like that journey, that human encounter. It is all of a piece, and yet it is made up of different component parts. There is one direction, but it is not altogether straight. It is one experience, but it can be viewed from more than one angle. The whole cannot be experienced apart from its individual elements. And that has something to tell us about how the Trinity came to be a doctrine of the church." There is no such concept developed in the New Testament, and yet there are passages where we encounter all three elements of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's just that they aren't drawn together in the New Testament into a singular concept, and -- indeed --- the witnesses, the participants, the writers and listeners and actors and observers at the time would not have known what the Trinity is, how it came to be, and what importance it might have because they were living about three hundred years before it came into being as a prominent idea in the church and in western civilization. It wasn't until the Council at Nicaea in 325 A.D. that it was fully enunciated, and that only occurred through a very difficult journey in

which some ideas were welcomed, others discarded, some people rewarded with success and others condemned for heresy. What emerged in the end, then, was only achieved through great sacrifice. And it remains controversial to this day. You might think it were settled orthodoxy, but you'd be mistaken. Just ask your fellow congregants what they think of it. I doubt you'd get unanimity even after the intervening 1700 years of human experience. And yet, if you examine the idea from as impartial a distance as possible, you can see precisely how it came into being. There had always been one God the Father in Judaism. Along came his Son, and he spoke with the same authority as the Father. And upon his departure, he left behind the Advocate, the Spirit, to lead his disciples in the right direction in his absence. Can these not be seen as different aspects of the same reality? How can the Spirit not have the same authority as the Son? How can there even be the Son without the Father? And the number three has particular meaning in the Bible. Along with the numbers 12 (the 12 tribes or the 12 disciples, for example) and 7 (signifying perfection), it holds an important place. You will recall the famous story of Abraham and the Three Strangers in Genesis. And the number three has interesting properties. Above all, it suggests relationship and God's relationship with his people is central to the story of scripture. There is a disquieting disequilibrium in groups of three, a lack of control, a new dynamic when compared with two, for example. One is forced to *share a conversation* when three entities are involved. Think for a moment about the difference between two people reaching a decision versus three. The dynamic simply changes with three: you have to reconsider a suggestion or a conclusion. With three, you are forced to look at things from an altered perspective introduced by that third entity. You have to listen to more than one person. And, as you know, there can be an important element of truth that emerges more easily from such a conversation. Some of this may well have been suggested to the scholars who returned to scripture to look for clues. What they found was a number of references to all three components of the Trinity even when the concept itself had yet to emerge. As for Nicodemus, in the end what does he take away from his conversation with Jesus beyond confusion and disorientation? Perhaps he was changed by the encounter, but we would not know it from the immediate circumstance. He does not see the meaning of "born again" even after Jesus explains it. And this may be because in the first century, "to be born from above --- in the words of Jesus --- is to be born of the sky, of the realm of God, to belong to that realm, to become a veritable child of God. This, of course, is to acquire an honor status of the very highest sort. Thus, whatever honor status a person might have in Israelite society, being born from above would *re-create* that person at a whole new level" which in an honor-shame society would have been an enormously disturbing and frightening prospect, one nearly impossible to comprehend or accept. So, Nicodemus is "trapped in the literal, unable to imagine the divine." When Jesus talks about the wind which we cannot see and yet whose presence we can certainly feel, by his response, Nicodemus again looks to be out of his depth. He is being challenged on so fundamental a level that he is simply overwhelmed. And yet it is certainly possible that he has been utterly transformed by the experience and we will not see this until later. For example, in chapter 7 of this very gospel, we find Nicodemus returning to the story as defender of Jesus' right to a fair trial and helping to bury him with honor after the crucifixion. And is not our own experience with Jesus of Nazareth of a like substance? Are we not shaken up, disoriented, unsure of what we are experiencing when we find him in the

New Testament accounts? Can we really say what we have concluded from even a number of encounters with him? Of several separate journeys along the way with him? So, that journey, that trip, that pilgrimage is what we have in common with all the others who have come up against the presence of God in the life of Jesus of Nazareth or his lingering presence in the Spirit that surrounds us on all sides even when it is not immediately visible, audible or verifiable. And what better way could there be to explain the meaning of Jesus than to say that he is in some sense so united with the vision of God as to be nearly indistinguishable from him. That he embodies the idea of Emanuel or “God with us” to such an extent that he merges with another heavenly reality. The key to the mystery of the Trinity then is something like this: a group of frightened disciples looking down at their feet and wondering how anything was possible began conversing with the Spirit of Christ and found that God was not the end of the story but the beginning of it. It was an experience in which, and through which, they were taken up into action and movement with God. Not a linear progression towards an end but “a circle, a dance, a spiral of love forever deepening and growing, forever replenished by the chalice of God’s loving and caring and sharing.” This was a “journey from a frightened group looking down at their feet, to those who were born again from above, those who discovered the Spirit of God within them, a Spirit which gave them the courage and the words to tell their own story in their own words” as they did on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. We hear the Gospel in Greek and Hebrew and Aramaic, Farsi and Urdu, Polish, Cantonese and Japanese, French and German, but we recognize in the end that we are all speaking the same language, the language of recognition, the language of conversion, the language of life in the Spirit. And “living in the Trinity can be a new confidence born of a spirit from above.”

Almighty and everlasting God, you have given us your servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of your divine Majesty to worship the Unity: Keep us steadfast in this faith and worship and bring us at last to see you in your one and eternal glory. Amen.

Sources

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