

Trinity Sunday

I take as my text today, from St. John's Gospel:

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

Today in the Anglican Tradition, we celebrate The Feast of the Trinity, a tradition that originated in the English Church about the 12th century. It continues as the major dividing line in the Church Year separating it into two segments: the historic commemoration of the Life of our Lord and a season or period of instruction and discipline.

Trinity Sunday is the celebration of the ultimate revelation of what God is through all eternity: three persons in one God.

There are tomes written on the Doctrine of the Trinity. There have been many attempts to explain it in simple and understandable terms.

In truth, there is no easy explanation. At best, we accept a mystery that God is Three Persons in One: God the Father, Who is the creator of heaven and earth, of all things created; God the Son, who in the Person of Jesus Christ redeemed the world and all creation; and God the Holy Spirit, who is the Sanctifier of all life, of all creation.

Each Person of the Godhead, the Trinity, is co-equal, co-eternal.

Perhaps, the Athanasian Creed comes closest to shedding light on the Nature of the Trinity. While not in the 1928 Prayer Book, it is recognized and accepted by the Anglican Church since its composition in the fourth century as a definitive statement of Christian belief.

Our Gospel passage, also appointed from St. John, as derived from the Sarum Usage, ties Trinity to the Sacrament of the Baptism; but, it is more far reaching in understanding a basic concept, “to be born again.”

This concept, “to be born again,” is the basis of the modern, and seemingly trite expression, “Born Again Christian.”

The theme that runs through this Gospel passage is a rebirth, better yet, a “new birth.”

Here, St. John recounts the meeting of Jesus with Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a very wealthy man, a member of the Aristocracy, and a member of the Sanhedrin.

This conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus may well be taken as St. John's apology for Christianity vis a vis the older faith of Judaism. The old versus the new, where the requirements of the old are, in a sense, made irrelevant by a whole new approach to the relationship of God to man.

The old was encumbering, based on a set of laws given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai.

This Law was the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, believed to be the perfect word of God. Moreover, to add one word to the Law or to take one away from it was a deadly sin, as the Law was considered complete and perfect.

From the Law was extracted an infinite number of rules and regulations to govern every conceivable situation in life.

Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, was not just familiar with the Law but was sworn to observe every detail of the scribal law.

Nicodemus had come in the night to meet with Jesus and engage in discourse. Nothing sinister may be read into the time of seeing Jesus. Night-time was considered the most appropriate time to study the Law because it was then when a person would be most undisturbed.

Though he may have had many points to discuss with Jesus, the focus of his discussion with our Lord was how to enter into the Kingdom of God.

There is recorded an interesting exchange following a pattern that Jesus used with enquirers.

First, the enquirer says something to which Jesus answers in a saying that is hard to understand. The saying is misinterpreted by the enquirer and Jesus responds with an even more difficult saying, followed by a discourse and explanation.

So it is with Nicodemus. He says to Jesus:

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.

Jesus gives an unexpected answer: "Except a man be born again, he can not enter into the Kingdom of God."

Our Lord truly understands what is really on the mind of Nicodemus and steers him away from dwelling on the signs and wonders that He did, telling Nicodemus that these were not so important. What was important was a change in a person's inner life.

But how can a man be born again? For Nicodemus, for the orthodox and pious Jews, the idea that they must undergo such a radical change before they could enter Christ's Kingdom, was a most difficult concept, if not impossible.

This is a wonderful passage from St. John. We hear our Lord explaining that this New Birth is an inward and spiritual one, and He makes the point that it is not the evidence of signs and miracles that are important; it is the change of life, the spiritual rebirth through faith in Christ that is essential.

The word that Jesus used for “again” has three meanings and all three work together in understanding the concept of “born again.”

First, it can mean “from the beginning, completely, radically.”

Or, it can mean “again” as in the sense of “for the second time.”

And, finally, it can mean “from above,” as in “from God.”

In the sense that Jesus was using the phrase, “born again,” all three meanings work together.

In signifying that this rebirth cannot come about “Except a man be born of water and *of* the Spirit,” Christ is telling us that it is through the cleansing action of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit being compared to water, that as water cleanses, purifies, and refreshes, so does the Holy Spirit.

Jesus, through John in his Gospel, conveys what is to come, that the visible sign of our spiritual rebirth will be the water of baptism, signifying the cleansing action of the Holy Spirit.

From the earliest days of the Church, that spiritual rebirth is consummated through the Sacrament of Baptism: the outward and visible sign being the pouring of water over the person baptized with the words, “I baptize thee in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.”

To complete the Sacrament, we have the inward and spiritual grace, as it states in the Catechism: "A death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness..." we are made "children of grace."

For Nicodemus, the outward rite was already familiar; it was a part of the Jewish tradition. But there was a difference.

The outward and visible sign was the same, that is, the water of baptism, the washing away of one's sins through sincere repentance and faith; however, with Christian Baptism, the outward rite was to be accompanied by an effusion of the Holy Spirit which makes baptism a real "new birth of water and the Spirit."

Baptism under the New Covenant was not to be symbolic. Nor was it to be merely an initiation or a sign or a pledge of grace, or a simple ceremony of dedication, edifying but not really necessary. Rather, through Baptism we become Christians.

Pure and simple. Whatever the claim; no matter what good works they may do; however good a life they may live: until that person is baptized with water in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost and is cleansed of sin by the washing of the Holy Spirit, effused with the Holy Spirit, that person is not a Christian.

Baptism, as a Sacramental instrument, incorporates individuals into the Mystical Body of Christ and enables them to participate in the grace afforded therein. For each of us, for our souls, it is the true beginning of life. It is truly a "re-birth."

St. Luke records in the second Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles that St. Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost and in his sermon said:

"...repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus the Messiah for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you, and

to your children, and to all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God may call."

Throughout the ages, in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, the importance of baptism for entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven has continued undiluted.

It is a change of life, a spiritual rebirth through faith in Christ that is essential.

"Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

"Except a man be born of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God."

When we were baptized, we were enrolled in the body of Christ's Church and received the grace to fight against the deceits of the world, the flesh and the devil under the banner of Christ. We became children of God by adoption and inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven.

If we learn nothing else on the Feast of the Trinity, it would suffice that we should understand that each Sacrament, beginning with Baptism, is predicated upon God acting through His three revealed natures: the Father, who created us and loves us as His children; the Son, Jesus Christ, who has redeemed us by His Blood; and the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, who dwells within us, who sanctifies us, and whose operation completes each Sacrament.

On the Feast of the Trinity, we not only celebrate the culmination of God's self-revelation of Himself to us, that is, the revelation to us of the Holy Trinity, God in Three Persons; we also are reminded of the elemental nature of Baptism, and that it is through a spiritual rebirth and faith in Jesus Christ that we can enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Many of us are like Nicodemus, searching for the truth and struggling with the answers.

Are we satisfied with ourselves, our lives? Do we want to be changed?

When our Lord confronts us, what is our answer?

To experience the intellectual truth of Christianity is one thing; to experience its power is another.

Jesus Christ offers us the opportunity to experience the power of Christianity by the cleansing of the Holy Spirit, being infused by the same Spirit, and born again as a child of God, an adopted son, an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven, willingly submitting everything to the Will of God.

We, then, are brought into the Bond of Love that signifies the Trinity; a relationship that is predicated on love and obedience, reverence and devotion.