

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White  
May 30, 2021  
in St Mark's Church, Bridgewater, Connecticut

*Isaiah 6.1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8.12-17; John 3.1-17*

Today is Trinity Sunday, the Sunday after Pentecost Sunday and just at the start of the long Pentecost season, which only comes to an end in some six months, on the first Sunday of Advent.

Trinity Sunday is, notoriously amongst us Episcopal clergy, the only feast day of the year that is about neither a person nor an event, but rather about a teaching, a Doctrine, and so is an invitation to reflect on (more awkwardly, to elucidate) how one God can exist in three persons --Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier-- and how those three persons can add up to a single God.

Preachers have tried to explain this using illustrations of the three-leaf clover --three leaves, one stem, all of a similar molecular structure; or the Ballantine beer logo --three intersecting circles standing for one beer; and the three states that H<sub>2</sub>O can assume --ice, liquid, and steam. But this year our Lectionary invites us to think about the Holy and Undivided Trinity through the story of Nicodemus's after-hours visit to Jesus.

Nicodemus is a powerful member of the Temple hierarchy. He is a learned Jew, a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest council in Judaism, and although many other members of the council are coming to fear Jesus, he is much interested in what Jesus teaches. He later defends Jesus when Jesus is brought to be crucified, and then Nicodemus brings a fortune in aloe and myrrh with which to entomb him. But as we hear today, Nicodemus's first encounter with Jesus confuses him and shows him unable to see beyond the conventional Jewish interpretations of the Scriptures in order to understand what Jesus is saying to him.

Personally, I think that Jesus is a bit hard on him, even mocking. But the way that the conversation with Nicodemus goes is similar to other encounters in John's Gospel that Jesus has with those trying to puzzle their way to understanding just who Jesus is.

A few weeks ago we heard that the apostle Thomas, because he was not around when the Risen Jesus on Easter night appeared to the others, said he would not believe in the Resurrection until he saw Jesus wounds and felt them. A week later the meat & potatoes Thomas is present when Jesus reappears, but he does not reach out his hand to touch, nor does he even blurt out, 'How did you do that?!' He says simply, 'My Lord and my God!'

Gently but firmly, Jesus responds, 'Blessed are those who have not seen yet come to believe', and then John the Gospel writer jumps in to cinch the point: he tells us that has many stories about what Jesus said and did but that he is telling us just a few so that hearing them we may believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

And recalling all this helps us to understand the much earlier conversation with Nicodemus. For look at what Jesus tells him that so much confuses him: to enter the kingdom of God he needs to have a new birth through the Spirit; that God so loved the world as to send God's only Son so that those who believe in the Son may have life in the Spirit that also comes from God. And there it is: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit --the Holy Trinity.

But Nicodemus, like Thomas, keeps saying that he does not understand, and John's point is that those two keep getting things reversed, keep putting the cart before the horse. Nicodemus and Thomas want to understand so that they can believe, and John wants them to start by believing so that they can understand.

You see, that three Gods add up to one God is not reasonable, until you begin to admit that sometimes you envision, experience God as a loving parent, as an almighty Creator; that sometimes Jesus acts and sounds like God as a good shepherd trying to save us from ourselves and each other, trying to reconcile us with one another and our Creator; and that, sometimes, something --a sort of Spirit?-- just lets us know what we need to do, where we need to head. Sometimes we simply experience the unreasonable, one God in three distinct sorts of experiences.

And the point in John's Gospel is that if we keep trying to reason it all through, to make sense of it, we may miss out on a lot that we might notice if we just began by believing the Good News --that God so loved the world as to come among us in human flesh and to urge us in a human voice to look and listen for the Spirit to lead us where we need to be. Amen.