

## 26/05/24 Trinity Sunday John 3:1-17

Today is Trinity Sunday. Today the preacher is supposed to explain how the Trinity works. I'm not going to do that. I'm just going to say, 'God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That is how God is'. But today's reading shows how God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit interacted in the story of Nicodemus. It comes fairly near the start of Jesus' ministry.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews, meaning he was a well-respected and important member of the ruling Sanhedrin. He was curious about Jesus. He wanted to know what Jesus was teaching but he did not want to ask him publicly in front of the other Pharisees because he knew that they were suspicious of Jesus, who had turned over the tables of the money changers. They had asked for a sign but Jesus would not give it to them then.

Jesus told Nicodemus that to enter the Kingdom of heaven, he would need to be born again. This is a puzzling idea for anyone to think about because we are alive, we know we have been born, so how can we be born again. It's worth remembering that the Pharisees were very proud of being born Jewish. It was good to be able to trace your family tree back to Abraham. God would favour you if you had the right ancestors and if you behaved yourself and kept the law. But Jesus was introducing him to the idea that that was not enough. People have to be made new. God's kingdom was wider than any particular family tree. It is for everyone. If God is God, then he is God of the whole world. Being part of the Kingdom of Heaven depended not on being a good Jew but on being reborn by water and the spirit. It is God's spirit that moves in people to draw them to himself. The wind blows where it will, Jesus said. The spirit of God moves in many varied and surprising ways. Whoever we are, Jew or Gentile, male or female, young or old, God's spirit speaks to us and moves us. he moves us to be curious about God, he moves us to ask questions about the Christian faith, he moves us to come to church. He moves us to accept Jesus. God is also active in our lives in many ways long before we are aware of it. When we reach out to him and respond to his love and when we receive his forgiveness and acceptance we can be baptised as a matter of faith. We need the water of baptism baptising us into a new life *and* the spirit of God working in us.

I think Nicodemus was a man who was hungry for the spirit to move as it had in the past when God had been at work bringing the Israelites out of Egypt, and bringing home the exiles from Babylon. These were miracles of deliverance.

But now their country was overrun by the Romans and these pagans were making their lives very hard. Jewish religious practices had become formulaic and dead. I think Nicodemus was a man ready for something to happen. But Jesus was not what he had expected. He did not look like the Messiah who would free the people from the Romans and restore the fortunes of Israel. Nicodemus did not yet know that God is a God of Grace.

Then Jesus used an illustration that Nicodemus would understand. It was the story of the Israelites who were on the move trying to get to the promised land but they were not able to go the shortest route. They had to go the long way round. The people were fed up and rebellious. They were back in desert wasteland with no water and just manna to eat. They spoke out against God and Moses and there was a plague of snakes. Some of the Israelites were getting bitten and dying. They came to Moses and confessed that they had rebelled against God, yet again, 'But please, God, save us'.

God told Moses to make a snake and put it on a pole and stand it in the middle of the camp. Anyone who looked at the snake would live. It was a matter of faith. If they looked they were healed. If not, not. What God had done was pure grace. The people were always moaning and rejecting God, even though they kept seeing miracle after miracle. Yet God made a way for them to be healed of their snake bite even though they did not deserve it. It was simple grace as so much of the Exodus story is. But people still had to have the faith to look at the snake on the pole. It was Grace and Faith. God's grace, their Faith. Yes, God had given them laws to run their lives but simply keeping a load of rules was not the way to God's favour. They had to receive his grace.

'Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.' Jesus drew a parallel between this story from the Exodus and what was happening right here and now in Nicodemus' lifetime. Jesus would be lifted up on the cross. People would be saved if they responded to him, confessing their need of him and turning away from their past life. The son of man, Jesus, had come to save.

These words of John 3: 16-17 are key to understanding the whole Good News of Jesus and what our faith is about. God loves his world; every blade of grass; every slug and snail; everyone who has ever lived. He loves the world so much that he sent his son into his world to save the world from itself, its' wickedness, carelessness, and selfishness. Everyone who believes in Jesus and trusts in him for salvation, is given the gift of eternal life. Jesus did not come to

condemn the world or punish us for our wrongdoings: he came to save us. We needed rescuing. But to be rescued it requires our faith and trust in Jesus. The Israelites had to look at the model of the snake to be saved we have to come to Jesus in faith and pray to him, and we will receive God's grace and forgiveness. We need to pray a prayer something like this one which you can say your 'Amens' to.

Dear God, thank you for sending your son Jesus into our world. Thank you that he died on the cross to save us. Thank you that he rose again and lives to walk with us through his spirit. I'm sorry for my past life and I turn to you, and put my trust in you for my new life. Please change me, rebirth me, into the person I should be, through Jesus Christ Amen.

(I would like to suggest that Nicodemus was re-born. Here was an honest inquirer who later, along with Joseph of Arimathea, took Jesus body from the cross and put in a tomb. Here were 2 men making themselves ritually unclean who publicly were declaring their love for Jesus.)

Question for Sunday 26th

Read John 3:1-17; Numbers 21:4-9

- i. What does this story tell us about the grace of God the Father in the Old and New Testament?
- ii. What does this story tell us about the activity of the Holy Spirit?
- iii. What does this story tell us about Jesus?
- iv. What does this story tell us about ourselves?
- v. What must we do to be in the Kingdom of God? What must I do to be saved?