

Sermon for Trinity Sunday, 30/05/21, by Richard Shreeve

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that hearts and minds are opened to receive the Word and lives be changed Amen

Today is Trinity Sunday - a day in the Christian calendar when all believers throughout the world are encouraged to think about the nature of the God whom we serve and love. One young vicar asked a more experienced colleague what he did on Trinity Sunday. His reply was, 'I ask the Bishop to preach.'

We worship one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit and, of course, that idea is completely mind-bending; how can one God be equally Three Persons? Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And we can tie ourselves up in knots trying to understand how that can be. We can come up with various analogies to help us. But in the end, every analogy falls short of the reality of God and we end up no nearer the truth and perhaps even more confused.

But perhaps Trinity Sunday should be easier than that. Perhaps, instead of trying to work out *how* God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, perhaps we should concentrate instead on the wonderful fact that this is how we *experience* God...

We experience God as our heavenly Father; loving us, holding us, guarding our lives.

We experience God as the Son; forgiving us, praying for us, leaving an example for us to follow.

We experience God as the Holy Spirit; empowering us to live for him and to live for others.

At the end of the day, it is not the doctrine of the Holy Trinity that is important. What is important is how we experience God in our lives. And it is that experience of God that we hold onto in faith, and it is that experience of God that we want to share with other people so that they can experience God for themselves.

So Trinity Sunday is a day not to tie ourselves up in theological knots, but a day to celebrate our experience of God in our everyday lives: God the lover, God the forgiver, God the empower-er. That is something truly worth celebrating and truly worth sharing with others!

In the passage that we have heard, read from John's Gospel this morning, Nicodemus was struggling to understand the exact nature of Jesus and his relationship to God the Father. But Jesus turns the conversation into one about how Nicodemus can experience God, which is far more important.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night to talk with him. Nicodemus is only mentioned in the Gospel of John but he's a central character in the narrative. Nicodemus was a Jewish leader – a Pharisee and he comes to Jesus here in Chapter 3, having seen the miracles of Jesus but unsure what to make of them. It seems that John gives us the story of Nicodemus to represent those who are on the edge of the Jesus event, seeing all that he does, but are not quite able to make up their minds and don't quite make a public commitment to him.

Perhaps we might say that there are many people in churches across the world who are of the same persuasion: those who come to church or attend church events and are intrigued by Christ, even attracted to him, but never seemingly make up their mind about him: they stay on the edges of the Christ-event, and never totally commit...

And what does Nicodemus say about Jesus in verse 2? "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God..." There is respect there: he calls Jesus 'Rabbi'. He even recognises the special nature of Jesus' ministry: "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God".

And yet Jesus knows Nicodemus' heart and he knows that respect and affection and partial rational understanding is not enough. "If someone is not born from above, they are not able to see the Kingdom of God." What does he mean by this? I think there are three things here:

1. It is not enough to be a religious observer:

Nicodemus knew the ministry of Jesus: he had listened to the teaching, he had seen the miracles, but according to Jesus, he had not seen the Kingdom of God.

We can go to as many church services as we like, we can attend as many Bible Studies as can be crammed into a week: we can do all that – but still not see the Kingdom of God. And the reason, quite simply, is because Christianity is not an observer-event. It is a way of living, a way of being with God.

Seeing Christian events from a human perspective is not enough: what is needed is new life, new sight: birth from above. Being born again doesn't mean a physical rebirth; it's a spiritual one. It refers to a change of heart—from indifference or hostility toward God to a love for Him and a desire to live out His best for us.

The Kingdom of God is not a phenomenon to be observed: it is a gift to be received. And that is why, in verse 5, Jesus changes his answer slightly: “No-one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit”. First time, he said, “No-one can see the Kingdom...” now he qualifies that: “No-one can enter the Kingdom...except by water and Spirit”.

What does he mean by that? Well, this is the second point

2. We are called to active participation in the church:

As Christians, we are called to participate actively in the life of the Church, and it is this that Jesus refers to when he mentions water, which is, of course, the water of baptism.

When we are baptised, we are baptised into the family of the church. And just as each family-member in the domestic home has something to offer that family unit, in the same way, each baptised believer must find their place through participating in the family of the church.

Church attendance should not be governed by “What can I get out of it?” but by the question, “What do I have to offer?”

And there is something incredibly important about regular, if not weekly, attendance, because it is encouraging to us all when the body of believers assemble together. The greatest gift we have to offer one another – is just being here: to celebrate together the love of God for us as a family.

But the third point Jesus is raising with Nicodemus here about what it means to be born from above is simply this:

3. That we are participants in the resurrection of Jesus:

“No-one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” The Spirit, of course, is the Holy Spirit, but what is interesting in this passage is Jesus’ response to Nicodemus when he seems not to understand... In verse 9, Nicodemus says, “How can these things be?” And Jesus is really short with him, verse 10: “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

Jesus is short with Nicodemus because, as a Pharisee learned in the Scriptures, his mind should have gone immediately to Ezekiel 37:5: “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord to you: ‘I will cause the spirit to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put the spirit in you, and you shall live.’”

So this reference to being ‘born from above’ is a reference to the resurrection, which is promised to us as a result of us being united with Christ in *his* resurrection. And Jesus strengthens this teaching in verse 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” It is the lifting up of Jesus on the cross that is the source of our salvation. It is the resurrection of Jesus that is the source of our new life and, as Paul says, “if we are united with Christ in his death, we will certainly be united with him in his resurrection.”

So, in conclusion, to the question, “What must I do to be saved?” “You must be born again!”

It is not the basis for creating Tier One and Tier Two Christians. It is not saying that infant baptism needs re-doing as an adult. It is not saying that we need to be baptised in the Spirit as a separate, conclusive event after being converted to Christ. It is not saying that this new state of being must be evidenced by speaking in tongues.

It is much more simple than that. “Unless you are born from above, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.” We are not to be observers – we are to be participants: to participate in the life of the Church, to participate in the resurrection of Jesus, who died for us, to give our lives to God, who fills us with his Spirit so that we might live in an intimate relationship with him and serve him better in the world. Being born from above is a radical transformation that brings newness to how we live.

And that newness of life is what we celebrate today, this Trinity Sunday, around the Communion Table. What we are sharing together is our lived experience of God, in which we participate every day of our lives and through regular worship together. And it is what we share with others when we leave here to today as we go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

I finish with Paul's Trinitarian farewell in 2 Corinthians 13 v 14 - *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen*