

The Gift of the Trinity

Nicodemus is one of the more intriguing characters in the Gospels. Only John tells us about him; perhaps because John, the beloved disciple, the one closest to Jesus, was the only one who knew Nicodemus and knew about him. I've often thought that Nicodemus is an example of the faithful; many of us are like Nicodemus. In Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus we see the reality of God, the Holy Trinity. This reality is how we come to know God and know the gift of God's love through the Trinity.

Nicodemus is faithful, disciplined; he knows God the Father, Creator of all. He has devoted his life to the service of God. He is a Pharisee, a leader, a teacher. He takes his faith very seriously. At the same time he is open to new revelations of the truth, new ways to know God. He continues to seek understanding even though he is dedicated to the traditions, to the law.

So Nicodemus comes to Jesus. Much like we come to Jesus, as adults. We are not brought to Jesus, as we bring our children, who may or may not come to Jesus on their own when they are beyond our control and influence. But Nicodemus comes at night – secretly, cautiously, concerned what others might think of him, concerned about his status and security.

Jesus challenges Nicodemus, just as Jesus challenges us. "*Be born anew...*" Know spiritual rebirth. Will you live only by the flesh? Where is the Spirit in your life? Don't we hear this same challenge if we know Jesus, if we hear his teaching, if we believe in God the Holy Spirit acting in our lives? Where is the Spirit leading us?

William Temple writes that this story with the famous 16th verse is "the whole great truth. '*God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that everyone that believeth on him may not perish, but have eternal Life.*'" This is the heart of the Gospel. Not "God is Love" — a precious truth, but affirming no divine act for our redemption. *God so loved that he gave*; of course the words indicate the cost to the Father's heart. *He gave*; it was an act, not only a continuing mood of generosity; it was an act at a particular time and place...Christianity is not one more religion of individual salvation, differing from its fellows only in offering a different road to that goal. It is the one and only religion of world-redemption...The whole conception of the Kingdom is so novel that only those who are ready to make a new start can even *see* it, let alone *enter into* it."¹ Do we see God's kingdom? Dare we say we want to enter God's kingdom?

We meet Nicodemus two more times in John's Gospel. When Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Tabernacles during the course of his ministry, the Pharisees try to arrest him. This might be months or even years before his last time in Jerusalem at the end of his life. The officers at the Temple did not arrest him because they told the Pharisees, "*No one ever spoke like this man.*" The Pharisees were intent on arresting and eliminating Jesus, but Nicodemus stood up in the council and said, "*Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?*" (7:51)

¹ William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, MacMillan Co., London, 1955, page 48.

We, too, are sympathetic to Jesus' teaching, to his way of life, to the hope he brings to the world. It is hard to oppose indifference or hostility. We don't want people to think that we are fanatics. Nicodemus did what he could, and, I guess, most of us do what we can to share Jesus' truth, to confront evil, to proclaim the importance of knowing and following Jesus. How do we respond to an indifferent, even hostile world?

At the end of John's narrative, Nicodemus joins Joseph of Arimathea in giving Jesus an extravagant burial, a burial suitable for a wealthy, successful, respected person — a new stone tomb, a hundred pounds of spices, fresh linen clothes. Even at the end, Nicodemus shows respect, if not devotion, if not love.

So we come with our respect, hoping it grows to devotion, to love, to courageous discipleship. I think Nicodemus moved beyond his belief in God the Father, the Creator – the one God. He came to see in Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, the Redeemer of the World. And he came to experience God the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, empowering faith and love and hope even after Jesus' death. Nicodemus may have been the first, joined by Peter and John and some of the other disciples, to comprehend the reality, the gift of the Trinity — one God in three persons, three distinct revelations — Father – Creator; Son – Redeemer; Spirit – Sanctifier.

Fr. Martin Thornton, an English priest, wonderful writer, teacher and spiritual director, writes, "The doctrine of the Trinity is just about the most practical idea that the Church has ever come up with. It is the creed in embryo, the foundation of prayer, and the guide to decision. Like all true theology, the doctrine of the Trinity is rooted in experience, and it safeguards the dynamic as against the static idea of God."²

Nicodemus came to be rooted in the gift of the Trinity. May we be also.

Isaiah 6:1-8
Psalm 29:1-4, 9-11
Romans 8:12-17
John 3:1-17

² Martin Thornton – Akenside Press; akensidepress.com/thornton; Tweet quote on March 24, 2015.