

*the spiritual quest*  
a sermon preached on the  
*Feast of the Holy Trinity*  
31 May 2015  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by fr david moore, vicar*

the lections: Isaiah 6:1-8, Psalm 29, Romans 8:12-17, John 3:1-17

We see in Nicodemus' well-known night-time searching out for Jesus the essence of the human quest. All our efforts to build and improve and develop the human situation have are motivated – consciously or otherwise – by this deep quest. The question Nicodemus can't bring himself to ask outright of Jesus is the question every human person faces. Where do we come from? What is our true nature? How are we to live it? Science cannot answer the question – it can only push back the frontiers further and further, yet remains silent before the ultimate question: Are we related to something infinite, or not? What is the true Self? What is the true Centre of the human person's being?

Nicodemus doesn't get a 'straight answer' from Jesus: Jesus almost never gives a straight answer! Jesus says neither yes or no to the implicit question, 'Are you from God?'<sup>1</sup> But Nicodemus gets rather more than he bargained for. "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again".<sup>2</sup> "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit".<sup>3</sup> "The wind blows where [she] chooses, and you hear the sound of [her], but you do not know where [she] comes from or where [she] goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, no matter how well we keep the rules, no matter how many good works we accomplish, no matter how correct we imagine our doctrine to be, no matter how many trophies or accomplishments we can boast: no one can see the Realm of God without being born again.

The church's lectionary gives us this Nicodemus-Jesus encounter on Trinity Sunday, presumably because his question is at the root of the matter of doctrine of the Holy Trinity. It reminds us that the question of the Trinity is, above all, about *experience* of the Sacred Centre, of the Infinite Holy Mystery who shakes our foundations.<sup>5</sup>

The 'triumph' of Christian orthodoxy at the ecumenical councils during the fourth and fifth centuries produced a political settlement in the church-empire. But that triumph was won at a terrible cost: Christian theology became preoccupied with "the classical metaphysical properties of God, such as omnipotence, omnibenevolence, impassability, incorporeality, and simplicity".<sup>6</sup> The triumph of explaining the metaphysics of God's inner life led to the inevitable social-political defeat – having become disconnected from the 'economy' of God's self-communication in the person of Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit.

In our time that disconnect has prompted questions such as: "Can we believe in God after Auschwitz? Can a male savior [sic] save women?" We may think that question isn't important, but I know many women for whom this matters greatly. "Does God's justice prefer the rich and powerful? Can God respond to petitionary prayer? Does God predetermine the fate of individuals, and is freedom illusory?" Does belief in God inhibit the full development of human persons?"<sup>7</sup> Again, we may take exception to that question, but I suspect we all have family and friends who have concluded that belief in the Christian God does indeed inhibit full development of persons, that it makes and keeps people as infants.

Only those who are being born again will have any meaningful response to such questions. A church spouting correct metaphysical doctrine is simply perpetuating what Jung called 'sacrosanct

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<sup>1</sup> John 3:2

<sup>2</sup> John 3:3 NRSV: 'from above', but the Greek literally means 'again'.

<sup>3</sup> John 3:5

<sup>4</sup> John 3:8

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 6:4

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, **God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life**, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991, p3.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, p3.

unintelligibility’: both useless in the face of the complex problems people face, and a scandal against the *evangelion* of Christ.

On the other hand, to ignore or reject the doctrine of the Trinity simply because of the sacrosanct unintelligibility of the pious speech which has not been born again in us, or because of the external moral failures of the church as institution, is the fatal loss of the crucial aspect of what makes the Christian *evangelion*. On both counts – either unthinkingly repeating empty pious phrases, or throwing Trinity doctrine out altogether – what is exposed is the tragic near-complete loss of the symbolic imagination in Western Christianity, such is our captivity to a dull and lifeless rationalism.

In the Nicodemus-Jesus dialogue we see Jesus avoid pious metaphysical formulas about God – and instead speak about what he has experienced. The Spirit’s freedom to unite heaven and earth, Spirit and flesh, God and humankind will not be subjected to our demand for control over her: and so it is with “everyone who is born of the Spirit”. While we cannot ever know fully who God is in Godself: we can know who God is as God-for-us, by encounter, experience, by being born again.

That’s the meaning of Incarnation. That is the essential the point of the Trinity: that ‘being begotten’, ‘of one being with the Father’,<sup>8</sup> is not a rational puzzle to be solved, but a relationship to be experienced. A ‘personal relationship with God’ is an experience of who God is as God-for-us – revealed in the person of Jesus, and by the audacity of the Holy Spirit who blows where she will.

And we know that we are being saved from formulaic religion and sacrosanct unintelligibility, when we find that this audacious Spirit has both shown us what we could never have imagined, and enabled us to be baptised with the baptism of Jesus, to drink the cup which Jesus offers,<sup>9</sup> to freely lay down life that we may receive it.<sup>10</sup> “For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live”.<sup>11</sup> “It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that [makes us] children of God, and if children, then heirs of God”.<sup>12</sup>

The quest for the ultimate meaning of our lives, for our true centre, for the reality of the Spirit bearing witness to our status as heirs of God, this is the chief purpose of religion. This is the church’s reason for existence. Good works, ethical behaviour towards our sisters and brothers, are the fruit: not the quest itself. The mistake that is so easily made is to confuse the quest with the outcome – to think that by ever-increasing good works we can please God. This is a case of the tail wagging the dog. Jesus’ question to Nicodemus rings in our ears: ‘Are you witnesses to the Christian gospel, and yet you do not understand these things?’<sup>13</sup> Being born again by water and Spirit is the quest.

And this is the task of all the baptised: to bear witness to the infinite reality of ‘the Holy One whose earth is filled with glory’.<sup>14</sup> This is precisely what makes the church entirely different from any other social organisation, and why the church is not just another social service agency. The church will be engaged in social action, yes of course. But only as an outcome of being grounded and centred in a living experience of this infinite Centre – by the grace of the Spirit who blows where she will.

This encounter with the Ultimate is what people hunger and thirst for – and it is the church’s primary calling to live out of this Centre, and thus be able to bear witness to the experience of its holiness.

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<sup>8</sup> Nicene Creed, **A Prayer Book for Australia**, Sydney: Broughton Books, 1995, p123.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 10:38

<sup>10</sup> John 10:18, Mark

<sup>11</sup> Romans 8:13

<sup>12</sup> Romans 8:16-17

<sup>13</sup> John 3:10

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 6:3