



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## A Sermon for Trinity Sunday

St. John 3:1-17

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The Feast of the Holy Trinity was introduced in the early Tenth Century by Stephen, the Bishop of Liège in Belgium. It caught on quickly and became popular in the churches of the Low Countries, Germany, and England. For hundreds of years there had been a tradition of a private mass, said by the priest each Sunday that honoured the Trinity, but this feast day sort of went public with it—made a much bigger deal of it. But our lessons today go back long before the Sunday after Pentecost was observed as Trinity Sunday. Typically, when we have a major feast on the calendar—like Christmas or Easter or Pentecost—there’s a Sunday before or after that fleshes it out, that explains what was going on when that event happened. And that’s what our lessons—particularly our Gospel—today were meant to do for Pentecost. But when Trinity Sunday came along no one changed the lessons, because here we see the Trinity revealed in the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus, we see the Trinity revealed as Israel’s story reaches its climax in Jesus and as the Spirit is poured out on God’s people.

In Jesus the new Israel was born and our Gospel today sort of bridges the gap between the old Israel at Mt. Sinai and the new Israel at Pentecost. Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus. He came at

night, which suggests he was afraid of being seen. He was one of the Pharisees—not all of them were bad or hostile to Jesus, but they were the ones who had it all figured out and Jesus didn’t fit well into their thinking. He’d been watching and listening to Jesus. He saw the God of Israel at work. He says to him, “Rabbi, we know that you’re a teacher who’s come from God. No one could do these signs you’re doing unless God is with him.”

Nicodemus knew the story. He knew the God of Israel. But he knew there was more to it. As he’d watched and listened to Jesus he’d figured that out. Jesus was talking about the Lord doing another great work, of the Lord leading his people in another exodus, this time more significant than the last one from Egypt. It didn’t fit into his Pharisaical paradigm, but there had to be something to it, because the Lord was so clearly with Jesus.

And Jesus picks up on the question implied in Nicodemus’ statement. He says, “The central truth you’re missing, Nicodemus, is that you’ve got to be born again to see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus understood so much. If anyone wanted to see God’s will done and his kingdom come on earth as in heaven it was the Pharisees. That’s what they lived for. And Nicodemus saw it in Jesus, but Jesus wasn’t preaching what the Pharisees were preaching. Jesus is saying to him that what he’s missing is this new birth, this being born again.

And Nicodemus doesn’t get it. “How can I be born again, Jesus? I know you’re not talking about returning to my mother’s womb, but what *do* you mean. A person is

only born once.” You see, what Jesus is getting at is this idea that Israel needs to be put back on track so that she can fulfil her mission—the one given to Abraham almost two thousand years before. And this idea of birth would have resonated particularly with someone like Nicodemus. To be a Jew was all about being born as part of Abraham’s family. Other things like circumcision and what you ate (or didn’t eat) were important too and especially so for the Pharisees, but those things were important because they identified you as part of Abraham’s family. They also drew a clear boundary between those who were in the family and all the uncircumcised, unclean gentiles were most definitely not.

What Jesus is saying now is that being born into Abraham’s family in the way the Jews had been thinking about it all this time wasn’t enough. In fact, it never had been enough. And Nicodemus should have known this. For almost two millennia people were being born into Abraham’s family and God’s kingdom still hadn’t come. For almost two millennia people were born into Abraham’s family and still the Gentiles hadn’t experienced the Lord’s blessing through them, at least not on the large scale envisioned in the Scriptures. Just the opposite. Zechariah had spoken of a day when the Gentiles would be grabbing hold of Jews by their clothing saying, “Take us with you, because we hear that God is with you!” Instead, because of the way most of Abraham’s children were living, the nations mocked them and taunted them saying, “Where’s your God now?” It takes more than being born of the flesh of Abraham.

Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, unless you’re born of water and the Spirit you cannot enter God’s kingdom. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” Israel needs something more than a biological inheritance. What does Jesus mean, though, when he talks about being born of water and the Spirit? This was what John the Baptist was preaching about. God was about to lead his people in a new exodus. As Israel had been led through the waters of the Red Sea to become a covenant family, so John was calling people to pass through the waters of the Jordan—a step of repentance and faith—and into a new covenant. Nicodemus needed that baptism of repentance. He needed to turn aside from his own misguided expectations of the kingdom and of the Messiah. But remember what John promised. When people asked if he was the Messiah he said that he was only the forerunner. John said, “I baptise you with water, but he will plunge you into the Holy Spirit.” And that’s just what Jesus does. As we recalled last week on Pentecost, Jesus takes those who have repented, who have turned aside from every false lord, from every false god, from every false source of security in order to take hold of him in faith by passing through the waters of baptism and he plunges us into the Holy Spirit. And it’s the Spirit who does the work of transforming us. It’s the Spirit who regenerates us. It’s the Spirit who causes us to be born again as he takes our old dead wood and unites it to the life of Jesus, causing us to bear fruit.

In our baptism we’re back at the Red Sea. There was the parted sea

and God calling Israel to pass through to freedom and new life on the other side. There was no receiving of the law in Egypt; they had to cross to the other side of the sea to find covenant with the Lord. And so we stand at the waters of baptism today. In them Jesus gives his promise: Repent, turn aside from every false way, trust me, follow me in faith and you will find forgiveness of sins and new life through the Spirit. To pass through the waters of baptism is to take hold of Jesus’ promise and to be born again of water and the Spirit.

But, again, this didn’t fit what Nicodemus knew. “How can this be so?” he asks. And Jesus asks a bit incredulously, “How can you *not* know this? You’re one of the teachers of Israel!” Nicodemus knew the story. He understood how Israel had so miserably failed in her mission. In fact, that’s what the Pharisees were all about: Calling Israel to be more faithful to the law so that the Lord would return to her. Jesus tells Nicodemus: God has heard cries and is visiting his people and he’s doing it in me. I’m the son of man, the one spoken of by Daniel all those years ago. I can tell you reliably the things of heaven because I’m the one who has come down from heaven.

I suspect that things must have started to sink in for Nicodemus at this point. He started to understand, because now Jesus really starts to correct what was wrong with Israel’s thinking about herself, about what it meant to God’s people, and about what it would mean for the Lord to come to deliver them. Jesus reminds Nicodemus of an event from Israel’s time in the wilderness. The

Israelites grumbled against Moses—which was ultimately grumbling against the Lord—and so he sent poisonous snakes into the camp. They bit people and many of those who were bitten died. But the Lord also gave Moses the remedy. He told Moses to cast a snake out of bronze and to mount it on a pole. Anyone who would look up to the bronze snake would be healed.

And now Jesus says, “Just as Moses lifted up that snake in the wilderness, so the son of man must be lifted up so that all who believe in him may have eternal life.” Jesus is pointing to his own crucifixion. As the snake was the affliction of the people lifted up for them to look at, so Jesus will take our affliction on himself—our sin and the punishment for it—and be lifted up on the cross. He will be lifted up for all to look upon—to see the horror and the gravity of our sin, to see that the wages of sin is death. But we will also see Jesus taking it all on himself and in that the horror and ugliness of his being raised up becomes an act by which he is glorified. In the cross we see the love of God made manifest in Jesus. And Jesus says in the familiar words we all know, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.”

Jesus corrects the central error in the thinking of Israel in his day. They were hoping and praying for the day when the Lord would come, not just to vindicate his people, but to judge their

enemies—to rain down fire and brimstone on the Romans and all other gentiles. But instead Jesus tells Nicodemus that he’s come not to condemn, but to save all who will look to him. *All*. The Jews looked forward to the condemnation he would bring, but Jesus says he’s come not to condemn, but to save. And this is where the part about being born again of water and the Spirit comes into play. Being born of water and the Spirit supersedes biology and genealogy. In Jesus God opens his arms to welcome Jew and Gentile alike. Abraham’s family is still central and important, but Jesus reminds us that genes and DNA were never really what made anyone part of Abraham’s family; it was about faith. It was faith for Abraham himself and it was faith in God’s promises for all who followed after: for Isaac and Jacob, for Joseph and Moses and Joshua, for gentiles like Rahab and Ruth, and even for the great kings like David and Solomon. And God’s promise was that through his covenant people, through these people who knew him in faith and were reconciled to him by faith, he would bless the nations. It happened here and there in the Old Testament. Rahab and Ruth are two of many small-scale testimonies to that, but here we finally see the Lord’s promise coming to full fruit. It’s what we celebrated last week on Pentecost as Jesus sent the Holy Spirit on these men of Israel gathered from around the world. They had heard Peter preach about Jesus and what he’d come to do. They rallied to Jesus in faith and in response Jesus poured his Spirit into them. Finally, through Jesus Israel became the source of blessing she was intended to be—not by flesh,

but by the Spirit—as these men and women took the good news to the nations: Jesus is Lord. He has conquered sin and death. In him is the forgiveness of sin, in him is life, in him God has returned to his Creation as King. And in him—the Incarnate Word—God makes himself known. In Jesus, God Incarnate, we have the restoration and fellowship with our Creator that he has been working towards ever since the day we rebelled and were cast out of his presence. In Jesus God’s kingdom—his new creation—has been inaugurated, in us and through us in the world. In Jesus and in us, his people, the promises made to Abraham are being fulfilled and we see that the blessing of God to the nations is for them to know him and to be reconciled to him in Jesus and the power of the Spirit.

Let us pray: Almighty God we praise you this morning for the grace you have shown us. Even as we rebelled against you, our good Creator, you were setting in motion our redemption: Father sending, calling, electing; Son speaking, coming, dying, rising; and Spirit uniting, renewing, regenerating, empowering. In the redemption of the world we see the glory of the Trinity and the majesty of the Unity and in gratitude we fall before you with the angels to sing, “Holy, holy, holy Lord God almighty.” By your grace, keep us strong in faith, O Lord, but keep us also faithful in our witness and our ministry to make your redeeming love known to the world. We ask this through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns together with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.