

**Sermon**

Sunday 30 May 2021

## Lesson

St John 3: 1 – 17

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Under the cover of darkness, in quietness and seclusion, the much-respected Jewish leader sought discreet conversation with Jesus. Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council or Supreme Court. A man of shining intellect, he discussed the mystery and nature of God with the rabbi from Nazareth. Jesus told him that we are to be ‘born again’. A much-misunderstood phrase, ‘born again’ means ‘dying to self’ and embarking on a pilgrimage of inner renewal: it is a journey into an ever-greater awareness of God. Nicodemus asked, ‘Can we enter our mother’s womb a second time and be born?’ From the depths of His being, Jesus replied, ‘The wind blows where it wills; you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born from the Spirit.’

There is an awkwardness or artificiality about the dialogue. The questions asked by Nicodemus are too literal and silly. In the Fourth

Gospel, the Gospel of John, there are a number of dialogues which are awkward, including the woman at the well. That awkwardness evaporates when we realise that we are not reading history, but theology: we are listening to spiritual truth being unfolded through storytelling. What matters most is the theology. The reference to 'night' at the beginning of the story may be more than the time of day or the absence of the sun: it is that God is always mystery, elusive, and hidden in the mind's darkness. Perhaps also, the awkwardness suggests that speaking of God is always beyond us; our ideas and words about God are always clumsy.

Jesus spoke of God as the wind: it blows where it wills: you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going'. He said everyone is to be born from the Spirit: the Spirit is the breath or wind of God. In the Book of Genesis, in the first verses of the first book, in the story about the first moment of creation, we read that, in the darkness, the Spirit of God hovered over the surface of the water: God said, 'Let there be light'. The story of Nicodemus and Jesus is about spiritual light and truth.

I like the imagery of the wind as a metaphor of God. The wind moves and enlivens the whole of the earth; the movement of air gives life to the planet. The wind, the air, is vital for us; our life and flourishing. Birds are upheld in flight. In the Book of Ezekiel, in the valley of the dry bones, it was the four winds which gave the assembled bones flesh, breath and new life. These are stories about being ‘born again’ in this life. We must not be intimidated by the language or evangelical exuberance in use of that phrase: discovering the Divine afresh is a story for each one of us. What images best work for you?

Today is Trinity Sunday, the Sunday on which the Church reflects on God as Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Many times have I felt myself to be blessed, held and strengthened by invoking the sacred name of the Trinity. In the Celtic tradition of the Church, in the Hymn of St Patrick, we sing:

I bind unto myself today  
The strong name of the Trinity,  
By invocation of the same,  
The Three in One and One in Three.

St Patrick spoke of the Spirit seething within him. The Celtic writer, the late David Adam, composed many prayers and blessings in Trinitarian language. One prayer reads:

The Trinity  
Protecting me  
The Father be  
Over me  
The Saviour be  
Under me  
The Spirit be  
About me

The Holy Three  
Defending me.....  
Sacred Three  
Encircle me....  
Holy Three  
About me

The concept of the One God as Three Persons is complex but, spiritually, it portrays God as relational, personal, intimate and strong: we are encircled; embraced by the Eternal in this life and always.

However, in the twenty-first century, we must surely avoid absolute claims about God. For centuries, the churches have said that we and we alone have a monopoly on the truths of God. Behaving in the

manner of an imperial, colonial power, Christianity has assumed a superiority over all world faiths. We can do that no longer: other faith traditions have insights into the Divine, into the reality of God. Underlying the insistence of the Church that God is Trinity, that this is absolute truth, I wonder if we can discern the muscle of patriarchy and the desire for domination?

The doctrine of the Trinity is not found explicitly in Scripture; it was formulated over the course of a hundred years or so at two church councils in the fourth and fifth centuries. The Roman emperors required agreement in Christian doctrine as a means of unifying the empire; the bishops complied. Every service of public worship concludes with the Trinitarian benediction and every child and adult at baptism is blessed in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. However, if we were writing our creeds today and formulating anew our understanding of God, would we use the same words, concepts and description?

At those Councils, the bishops, the elite of the Church, made decisions about the nature of God which remain in place to this day. They did not consider insights about the Holy One from other faith traditions and, perhaps most crucially, the only people in the room were male. In the Gospels, the first people to encounter angelic visitors, the empty tomb and the Risen Christ were women. In his letter to the Church in Rome, the apostle Paul named numerous women who were significant in the early church and it was Phoebe, a woman, who carried Paul's letter to Rome. In Rome, she would have read the letter to groups, explained its contents and perhaps preached. Despite all this, when the Church 'defined' God as Trinity, women were excluded from the discussion. What insights do you have about God? What are the metaphors that speak most powerfully to you? For me, God is Breath, the Wind, Creative Spirit, Eternal Lover, Father, Mother, and Mystery.

The distinguished interfaith scholar, the late John Hicks, used an ambiguous duck-rabbit picture to make his point. Hicks said that, when looking at the picture, people saw either a duck or a rabbit but

not both. He said that in cultures which had no rabbits, people saw only the duck while, in cultures that had no ducks, saw only the rabbit. Hicks said that it was one thing to say that we see a duck and you see a rabbit, but quite another to claim that the other side was wrong. God, Ultimate Reality, is experienced by people in their historical and cultural context. God is beyond than anything that humanity can conceive, beyond the imagination of any single culture.

The Trinity is a truth about God: God is relational and empowering. Trinitarian prayers and blessings are pastorally powerful. For me and many others, God as Trinity is a truth, but it is not the whole truth. Even the word 'God' is a metaphor. What images come to mind for you?

Amen.