

2021.Holy Trinity

“I believe in God, the Father almighty...”

“I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord...”

“I believe in the Holy Spirit...”

We say these words, together, whenever we gather for worship.

Each time we gather, we affirm our faith / our belief in the Triune God.

But, even as we say these words together... I wonder, do we think about what we are saying? Do we *understand* these words that attempt to articulate our understanding of God as Trinity — an “understanding” that is central to our faith as Christians? *Can* we truly “understand” it? Are we expected to?

God is three. God is one.

The Father is God, the Son is God, and Holy Spirit is God—but not three Gods... One God.

One God in Trinity. Trinity in unity.

God is now. God has always been. God will always be. Infinite... eternal.

God is mystery.

Revealed / made known... present... yet beyond our comprehension... beyond our words...

Is there a more fitting scripture text for this day [Holy Trinity]... than our reading from John’s Gospel— this strange night-time conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus?

Nicodemus is a Pharisee... a learned man... with impressive credentials.

He is presented as “*a leader of the Jews.*” Jesus, himself, calls him “*a teacher of Israel.*”

As a Pharisee, he is a scholar... an “expert” in the Hebrew scriptures / their interpretation.

Nicodemus has clearly been watching Jesus (as have the rest of the religious authorities, of course)—his teaching and preaching... his healing and exorcising of spirits...

Nicodemus *thinks* he knows / understands who Jesus is... but he *wants* to know more. He *wants* to know / understand who Jesus is / what he is about... maybe he even *wants* to believe... but he struggles...

And his nocturnal conversation with Jesus doesn’t really help... or does it?

“*Rabbi,*” Nicodemus begins... “*we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God*”... to which Jesus replies, “*...no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*”

And that leads them down that long / winding road of what it means to be “*born from above*” / “*born anew*” / “*born of water and Spirit*”...

Nicodemus tries to understand, but he is taking what Jesus says at the most literal level... “*How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?!*” he asks.

“It’s not something you can do.” Jesus replies. *“The Spirit does it. The wind blows where it chooses... you hear the sound of it, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it goes—that’s how it is for those who are born of the Spirit.”*

In the end, Nicodemus is left perplexed and confused and speechless, *“How can these things be?”* And that’s the last we hear from him here... although Jesus has a lot more to say—important stuff to say... about God / about God’s plan of salvation for the world that God loves (which in John’s Gospel, remember, is the “God-hating world” / the world in opposition to God)... about why he (Jesus) came – to save the world... NOT condemn the world... [the Gospel in a nutshell].

In this conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus refers to all three persons of the Trinity.

God is the One who loves the world... who gives the Son... so that everyone who believes may not perish but have eternal life. God the Father sends the Son—NOT to condemn the world... but to rescue it / save it / restore it / make it whole...

Jesus is the only Son of God... the One sent from God... the One who connects heaven and earth. What we know of God is what Jesus has revealed. He bears witness to what he has seen and known. Like the serpent in the wilderness, He will be lifted up – to expose the sinfulness of world... to save people from its deadly effects...

And those who believe / put their trust in Jesus—have eternal life... because they have been *“reborn from above”*... *by water and Spirit*. Like the breath of God in Genesis, the Spirit gives life to us. Like the wind, the Spirit blows wherever it chooses... and though we may perceive its presence, we cannot comprehend it... nor control it.

Nicodemus leaves this conversation with Jesus... baffled / confused... *“How can this be?”* But he does make another appearance in this Gospel... after Jesus’ crucifixion... when he joins Joseph of Arimathea in taking down / anointing / burying Jesus’ body. Does he understand then? Does he believe? We don’t know... but I think his actions show a change of heart... a transformation... a growing belief in / allegiance to Jesus. Nicodemus, as I see it, is one who grows in his faith / understanding of who Jesus is and what he came to do. God keeps working in / on / through Nicodemus over 16 chapters...

Yes, the Spirit blows where it chooses... in its own time... to create faith / to bring about understanding / to give new life...

When we think of the Spirit... of being *born from above / born anew / born of water and Spirit*—we, of course, think of baptism... our adoption into God’s family... into relationship with the triune God.

Listen to the claim that Paul makes in his letter to the church in Rome: that the Spirit bears witness *“that we are children of God, and if children then also heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ.”*

Did you hear that?! Think about what Paul is really saying here!

Through baptism, we are made children of God. And as children of God, we are *heirs*—inheritors of all that is God’s / all that God has to give.

And not only that, we are *joint-heirs* with Christ Jesus—we enjoy a relationship that is both with God as Father... and with Christ who is now our brother. These relationships lift us up into the very life of God... through the Spirit.

When God became human in Jesus Christ, God chose “to bear the sins of the many.” When God gave God’s only Son... so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life—a swap was made. Jesus took our imperfection / sin / guilt / death... in exchange we get Christ’s perfection / righteousness / innocence / life.

It is what Martin Luther referred to as “the happy exchange.” Jesus became like us... so that we could become like Jesus!

That is what happens when we are “*clothed with Christ*” in baptism.

Through faith, we gain all of Christ’s benefits... as he takes our heaviest burdens upon himself. In Christ, God says, “Everything that is mine is yours, and everything that is yours is mine.” That is our standing before God—adopted into the family (beloved children of God)... invited into all the blessings / gifts God offers...

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Dear friends, I don’t pretend to understand the Trinity—Three in One... One in Three. (In all honesty, I’m pretty skeptical of those who say they do.)

The Trinity is a mystery. Even great theologians don’t completely understand it, and scholars spend their whole lives studying it.

What I do know is that our “understanding” of God—the Holy Trinity—(limited as it is)... has come about through the experiences that God’s people have had of God...over many hundreds of years.

It came (and still comes) from real, lived experiences with the God who is “Emmanuel” – “*God with us*”... the God who shows up in and among us – always for the sake of relationship and life.

To use the words of the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, “This is a God who is not only *with* us, but who is *for* us as well. To be *for* us means that God has our best interests in mind.”

Perhaps that is all the *understanding* we need...