

A Sermon for Trinity Sunday

Sunday June 7th, 2020 at Saint John's Church in Savannah

Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again St. John 3:7

Today we give thanks for the glory of the Triune God – God one in substance and three in person, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost – a doctrine that may seem obscure, arcane, and irrelevant, but, as today's lesson show, which names the reality that makes possible the attainment of eternal life with God in his Kingdom. The prophets had taught Israel to look for deliverance from oppression, justice and peace in the coming of God's kingdom, by a God appointed ruler – whom Daniel named the Son of Man. To a people oppressed by the pagan empire of Rome, such promises were the focus of hope. Then John had come, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins – a new beginning, in preparation for the coming King, and his baptism in the Spirit. John spoke of the Kingdom's imminent arrival – but after John came Jesus who proclaimed in word and deed of the Spirit's power that the Kingdom had already come.

It's against that background that Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, an establishment figure seeking a discreet interview with an unconventional outsider. Nicodemus was a *Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, and a Master, or Teacher of Israel* – a person of serious religious and nationalistic commitment, zealous in his observance of the Law; a civic and religious leader of influence, and a noted authority on the Scriptures. And it is apparent that he is genuinely interested in what Jesus has to say about the coming of God's kingdom and is complimentary in his approach: *Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.* Jesus does not return the compliment – but immediately challenges the confident assumption expressed in the words *we know* – the confident assumption of the learned expert, the trained professional, in his expertise. You think you know about these things? *Amen, amen, I say unto you: Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*

What he cuts off is the assumption that anyone's status, privilege, expertise, or accomplishment – be it religious, moral, intellectual - brings them any closer to the Kingdom of God than, let's say, a homeless drug addict. We are not capable of seeing the Kingdom of God, let alone entering it – except by a new beginning that owes nothing to what we know or have accomplished, by a power that is not our own: *Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.* John's baptism was in water only, a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins - a matter of regrets and resolutions, of aspirations beyond man's power to accomplish. What Jesus points to is a baptism that is *in water and the Spirit* – the renewal of our nature accomplished by the power of God – and he explains why it is necessary:

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
An effect cannot be greater than its cause: if you want to attain to God you have to begin with God – you can't begin with yourself, no matter what your accomplishment. You can't start with the finite and build a bridge to the infinite – it has to come to you
Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. How can the flesh, the merely human, attain to God? It's impossible! And however absurd it seems to Nicodemus, how can the Spirit of God not have the power to bring about this new birth? That possibility cannot be denied.

Still, Nicodemus is dumbfounded and incredulous: *How can these things be?* Jesus asks him - *Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?* As an expert in the Scriptures Nicodemus should himself be familiar with this teaching, for they speak of inward renewal by the Spirit – as does Ezekiel this morning - God's promise to cleanse his people with water, and to put his Spirit within them. So much for Nicodemus' confident assumption that *we know* – and over against that refuted claim Jesus sets his own: *We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.* When you cannot observe a reality by direct observation, the testimony of eyewitness has a judicially-valid claim to our acceptance as true. Having cut off Nicodemus' confidence in his own knowledge, Jesus calls him to the knowledge of faith, which believes what it cannot see, in reliance on the word of witnesses. It is through faith in the word of witness that we may see, enter into God's kingdom - and faith is only possible by rebirth in water and the Spirit. It is faith alone which is able to grasp *the heavenly things* of which Jesus now speaksⁱ - the ascent and descent of *the Son of Man*, the one Daniel said was appointed by God to rule his kingdomⁱⁱ. His descent from heaven, is the Incarnation of the Word, the Son of God's becoming Son of Man in the womb of Mary; but his ascent Jesus explains by recalling the old story in the Book of Numbers (ch 21). During their wanderings in the wilderness, the people of Israel grumbled rebelliously against Moses, and God sent them a plague of serpents which bit them, killing many – but God gave Moses a remedy – commanding him to make a bronze serpent and to lift it up on a pole, for all to see – and those who looked did not die - *and, Jesus says, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* Just as physical life was restored to Israelites when they looked at the brazen serpent, so sinners are rescued from death, and receive eternal life when they believe in the Son of Man who was lifted up, exalted and glorified in the cross of shame. We don't have to die from the evil at work in us –the serpent's bite of sin - we can look on him, the one who was *made in the likeness of our sin, and for our sin*, to bear its judgment in himself (Romans 8) – we can look on him, and live. And yet to see and believe in the heaven-descended Son of Man, lifted up and exalted on the cross of shame and death for our

salvation – to see and enter into the Kingdom of God, this takes a power of spiritual vision, for which we must be born from above, by water and the Spirit.

People talk about the Trinity as if it were some obscure arcane and irrelevant relic we can ignore but it is the reality within which we may have life and salvation. It is the Spirit bringing us to new spiritual life who were dead in sins, by faith in the Son who died for us – it is the Father who sent them, to whom they bring us, that we may have life and glory in communion with him for ever; and so today we pray for spiritual vision, the power to see and enter into the Kingdom which is both justice and peace through faith - for ourselves, our country, its leaders, protestors, police, and people; and to the one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, let us give all thanks and glory, now and forever. Amen.

Numbers 21:4-9

⁴ And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. ⁵ And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread. ⁶ And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. ⁷ Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. ⁹ And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.

Revelation 4

After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter. ² And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. ³ And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald. ⁴ And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold. ⁵ And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. ⁶ And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind. ⁷ And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle. ⁸ And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, LORD God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come. ⁹ And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, ¹⁰ The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, ¹¹ Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

John 3

³ There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: ² The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a

teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. ³ Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. ⁴ Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? ⁵ Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. ⁸ The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. ⁹ Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? ¹¹ Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. ¹² If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? ¹³ And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: ¹⁵ That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Ezekiel 36

¹⁶ Moreover the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, ¹⁷ Son of man, when the house of Israel dwelt in their own land, they defiled it by their own way and by their doings: their way was before me as the uncleanness of a removed woman. ¹⁸ Wherefore I poured my fury upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for their idols wherewith they had polluted it: ¹⁹ And I scattered them among the heathen, and they were dispersed through the countries: according to their way and according to their doings I judged them. ²⁰ And when they entered unto the heathen, whither they went, they profaned my holy name, when they said to them, These are the people of the LORD, and are gone forth out of his land. ²¹ But I had pity for mine holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the heathen, whither they went. ²² Therefore say unto the house of Israel, thus saith the Lord GOD; I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name's sake, which ye have profaned among the heathen, whither ye went. ²³ And I will sanctify my great name, which was profaned among the heathen, which ye have profaned in the midst of them; and the heathen shall know that I am the LORD, saith the Lord GOD, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes. ²⁴ For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. ²⁵ Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. ²⁶ A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. ²⁸ And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.

ⁱ *The earthly things* of which Jesus spoke is our need of new birth by the Spirit – something that should be evident to any student of the Law and the Prophets

ⁱⁱ Daniel 7