

ADDRESS FOR SUNDAY 27th MAY 2018

TRINITY SUNDAY

It was the week before the summer examinations, and I was revising the seasons of the church calendar with a class of ten year olds - Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and so on. They gave me all the right answers and we were doing splendidly until we got to Trinity. They could tell me that Trinity Sunday is the day when we think about the three aspects of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit - but when I asked them what the *season* of Trinity was all about there was a long pause, and then one boy said "Oh, yes. That's the time when nothing happens!"

Well, I knew what he meant - no special festivals - but that wasn't the answer I was looking for. The liturgical colour for the season of Trinity is green, which reminds us that it is the time when, guided and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are supposed to *grow* in faith, and in our knowledge and understanding of God and his Son. And yet, as the boy said, it's so often a time when, spiritually speaking, nothing happens. It's a bit like neglecting to feed and water a plant and expecting it to flourish anyway.

Several years ago, I read a book with the splendid title "If You Want To Walk On Water You Have To Get Out Of The Boat". I have it here this morning. The first chapter deals with the various types of boats in which all sorts of people, for all sorts of reasons, choose to sit tight and do nothing about spiritual challenges rather than step over the side as Peter did in response to Jesus' challenge on a stormy Sea of Galilee. And I found myself thinking about the particular boat that Nicodemus was in when he first came to talk to Jesus, and how hard it must have been for him even to contemplate getting out of it.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and the Pharasaic boat, certainly as far as those who sailed in it were concerned, was the equivalent of Titanic - designed and constructed in such a way that it was reckoned to be unsinkable. When a man became a Pharisee, he took a pledge in front of three witnesses that he would spend the rest of his life observing every detail of the Law of Moses which the Jews believed was the perfect word of God. The Pharisees were very sincere in their efforts to do this, but also very misguided in that they felt it necessary to devise a whole set of rules and regulations to ensure that they, and everyone else, kept the Law as perfectly as possible. The Scribes spent their lives devising these so called "fringe" or "fence" laws, which covered every aspect of Jewish life, and by Jesus' day these had become so important and so burdensome that the spirit of the original Law had been all but lost. For example, God's law simply said that the Sabbath must be kept as a holy day and no work should be done, but the scribes had produced upwards of 600 rules about what constituted work, and what you couldn't do on the Sabbath - you couldn't walk more than 1,000 yards, you couldn't lift anything heavier than a dried fig, a doctor was forbidden to heal...there was even a rule forbidding women to pluck out a grey hair! And keeping these rules, and observing the endless rituals which went with them, was

what a man like Nicodemus believed would please God, and win him a place in God's kingdom. It was not at all surprising that when Jesus consistently broke these rules he was roundly condemned by the Pharisees as a dangerous revolutionary. It was very surprising indeed that one of their number should want to engage in discussion with him.

John tells us that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. The popular explanation for this is that he didn't want anyone, particularly his fellow Pharisees, to know what he was doing. That may well have been true - but I like the other possibility better. The Rabbis believed that the best time to study the law was at night when they could be undisturbed. I like to think that Nicodemus came at night so that he could have an uninterrupted, in-depth talk with Jesus. He was a ruler of the Jews, a teacher of Israel, he had thought that he'd got it right, but what he had seen and heard this young Rabbi doing and saying with such authority had raised vital questions which needed to be answered - so he came to Jesus. And isn't that what we all need to do on a regular basis if we are to make progress in our spiritual life. It's so easy to think that we've got it right, that there's no more to learn, that having been baptised and confirmed according to the rules and rituals of the Christian church, we can sit tight in the boat of spiritual complacency and take no further action. Better not to ask questions anyway, because the answers might rock our boat to an uncomfortable degree, and raise further questions and answers which we might not feel able either to understand or to cope with.

That's certainly how it was for Nicodemus. No doubt when he began the conversation by acknowledging that the things Jesus was doing were signs that God was with him, he was thinking about popular Messianic expectations regarding the establishment of God's Kingdom and the status which the Pharasaic body would enjoy within that kingdom. No wonder he was knocked sideways when Jesus told him "The solemn truth is, Nicodemus, that unless someone has been born again - (or, to use a different meaning of the same word,) born from above, by water and the Spirit, they won't be able to *see* God's kingdom, let alone get into it!"

Now despite his remark about the impossibility of a second physical birth, Nicodemus would understand, in one sense at least, what Jesus was talking about, because when someone from another faith became a Jew he was regarded as having been reborn. According to the Rabbis, a proselyte was like a new born child, and the important thing for him now was that he had been reborn into the right family. He had become a child of Abraham, and that gave him a new and very special status. The difficulty for Nicodemus was that the rebirth Jesus was talking about had nothing to do with being a child of Abraham. According to Jesus, *anyone* whose rebirth was of water and the spirit was welcomed into the Kingdom and became a child of God - which put any earthly status, either religious or social, very much in the shade.

Nicodemus couldn't understand it - especially the bit about the Spirit. He couldn't see how any of it could be possible. He had yet to learn that Jesus was bringing a new knowledge of God to humankind, that he was the bridge connecting heaven and earth,

connecting God with his world - a world which God loved so much that he sent his only Son so that by his life and death and resurrection all who believed could also become his children. Water is a symbol of cleansing, and the Spirit is the symbol of power, and together they stand for the cleansing and strengthening power of the crucified, risen Christ which washes away the sins of the past, reconciles us to God, and enables us to live new lives in the future. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, the Spirit is like the wind - you can't see it, but you can feel it's effect in your own life and see it in the lives of others. And this wasn't theoretical. Jesus was speaking from personal experience. It was at the moment of his baptism that his full relationship with God was confirmed when he was anointed by the Holy Spirit. That was the point at which his ministry began. It was by the power of that Spirit that he did all the wonderful things which had so impressed Nicodemus in the first place, and which ultimately won our salvation. And that same Trinity of love and power is still freely available to all those who believe.

The story of Nicodemus reminds us that we can so easily become "earthbound" in our thinking. To understand the nature of God's Kingdom, we have to listen to the words of Jesus and reflect on their significance. Water baptism is very important both because it symbolises a fresh start in a new life with God through belief in his Son, and because it brings us into the community of believers - but it isn't enough by itself. There also has to be baptism by the Spirit, that third component of the Trinity, because the Spirit gives us the power to live our new lives to the full. It is easy to think that the moment of rebirth is the centre of what it means to be a Christian, that there is no need to move on from that experience, that all we have to do is remember it and be grateful for it. Of course it was a very important moment, but, as with a newly born baby, the next important thing is to feed and nurture the new life so that it can grow to achieve its full potential. We're filled with the Spirit for a purpose - we have to find out what that purpose is, and then go for it! Remember those words from the book of the prophet Isaiah: **Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying 'Whom shall I send and who will go for us?' And I said 'Here am I: send me!'**

So, as we move into the season of Trinity, let's make sure that it's not going to be a time when nothing happens. Let's be ready and willing, in the power of the Spirit, to make it a time of growth – growth in faith, and in our knowledge of God and his Son; let's be ready to step out of the boat, to ask the questions and rise to the challenge of the answers, to realise our full potential as children of God and citizens of his Kingdom.

Amen.