

## Explaining Mystery

There are just some things that it seems it would be better if more people who stood in pulpits would be up front about the impossibility of the task which seems to be put before them on the by calendar which names today Trinity Sunday. I mean, what are you supposed to do with that? Despite the fact that our scriptures are very free with the use of all the names which are used within the Trinitarian formula: Father, Son and Holy Spirit--nowhere is the word Trinity ever mentioned within Scriptures themselves. Many of my colleagues just avoid addressing the topic and focus on the call story of Isaiah which is the Hebrew reading for today. If you want to read John Calvin's thoughts on the matter you can get really confused as he discussed the oneness of the three and the threeness of the one. I'm not sure I ever fully understood how he was separating those two concepts. The traditional structure on which theological thinking, or discourse about God stands a stool that has three legs: Revelation which is what data is given about God; reason which is how we process that data intellectually and logically; and finally tradition which is how others before us have dealt with the previous two things. Some theologians treat the Trinity as a mathematical problem indicating that three is a necessary number for balance to prevent omission when pairing occurs...leaving an "odd person out". What seems to be the key to this issue is that as time passed and people began studying the scriptures all these names and ways of experiencing God emerged from the accounts they had received from their traditions so the leaders felt called to find a way to explain these differences in experiences. From this desire to explain what was described, the doctrine known as the Trinity emerged. And, that is as close to an explanation as I can come...not of the Trinity, but of how we came to have the doctrine. Those first theologians, known as the Desert Fathers, compared the members of the Trinity to the source of light being the Father, who then illuminates the Son who comes to you in the form of the Spirit so that you feel the warmth of the Son which brings the light of the Father...creating an inter-relationship which nourishes and sustains. That is one of the oldest analogies I could find about the Trinity. And it points to what I believe is at the heart of the matter—what is central to any attempt to describe God must begin by acknowledging God's desire for relationships. The Godhead itself, however we may imagine it—creator, redeemer, sustainer—whatever words we may choose—is always going to be beyond our ability to comprehend—but the experience of the Godhead as the one who comes to us in our need to provide for us, to comfort us, to sustain us...that is the way that we come to understand our Triune God. Our scriptures whether we read from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Gospel narratives, or the letters of those early followers don't explain the Trinity as much as they describe the various ways the actions of God have been experienced by God's people throughout recorded history. The actions of God as experienced by God's people have always been relational—God's desire to be in relationship with us—God's creation. What is revealed is always God's reaching out or down...to us. In whatever form we perceive...it is God who initiates the relationship. If we understand or comprehend nothing else about God...that is enough...God loves and desires to be in relationship with each and every one of those whom God created. And this brings us to the visit of a certain Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews who comes to Jesus by night. In this extended conversation we have all the elements which will form the doctrine of the Trinity named, and the one who hears then so named evidently has no comprehension of what he is being told...and we want to feel superior because

we know who Jesus is. We know Jesus is the Son of God sent into the world to redeem us. Much is made of the fact that Nicodemus come to Jesus in darkness because the darkness represent his lack of understanding; he seems to leave in the same condition. This passage is thick with words that have double or even triple meanings...and images that are presented as sharp contrasts. In translations, the phrase "born again" which so confuses Nicodemus can be also be translated "born anew". Nicodemus becomes focused on the idea of the literal idea of an adult re-entering a mother's womb and so totally misses the concept of a new start...of being born anew in the sense of a huge transformation which relocates one's identity and resets the possibilities for one's character and behavior toward others. Within this passage there are three questions or statements made by Nicodemus to which Jesus gives a response with the same opening statement: "very truly, I tell you." This is Jesus' assurance that the answer he gives is a true representation about God's reign. These statements are John 3:3 "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." John 3.5 "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit"; and John 3.11 "we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony." The key to seeing and entering God's kingdom is this re-alignment, this transformation which comes from the experience which Jesus is giving an eye witness account about in his teachings about the kingdom. So far, although Nicodemus accepts that Jesus must be a teacher who comes from God he only comes to see Jesus because what he has heard of the healings, not the teachings. Jesus is telling that is not enough, that he must re-visit the legalistic view that is being used and be born anew—he must realign himself with the fundamentals of God's ways. Jesus' mission is to make God known to the world—to understand the true ways of interacting with God and each other are not in ritual but in relationships. The ways of caring which in Deuteronomy included the widow and the orphan which the Pharisees and priests have abandoned. This realignment comes with being born of the Spirit so a new way of living emerges. We do not get any sense from this passage that Nicodemus gets it. That Jesus is encouraging him to leave his legal ways behind and look into his heart: to experience the Spirit and being born from above so that his style of living will be altered. When we get too involved in trying to make explanations for the mystery of the Trinity, when we are too much like Nicodemus and ask "How can this be?" I think that we need to follow that encouragement and look into our hearts for what we need of God's presence will be there waiting for us. Then we look in the mirror and ask how God's presence in our lives affects how we live and treat others. And then we can look at the final verses of this passage from John and celebrate that God has so steadfastly sought to create relationships with us for these are truly words to hold close and cherish, words clear and without mystery: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.