

Seeking the Truth

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; dear friends in Christ: Today's reading from John's Gospel contains what has got to be best known verse in the entire Bible: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life". It's been called "the Bible in a nutshell", and it's the heart of what is a great Gospel-filled text. And it's worth noting that this is a great text for Holy Trinity Sunday as well because all three persons of the Godhead are mentioned explicitly. It even explains the role of each person. We have God the Father who gives his only-begotten Son to be lifted up like the snake on the pole for the world's salvation. We have the Son who is lifted up on the cross and who has come not to judge the world but to save it. And we have the Holy Spirit of whom (and with water) a person must be born again to be able to see and to enter the kingdom of God. So, one God in three Persons each performing his own particular role on behalf of fallen humanity in order to redeem us and give us everlasting life. And why? For no other reason than God's infinitely great love. It's all there. And it's wonderful.

But as wonderful as it is, over the years I've noticed a tendency that people have to cherry pick this text for certain highlights and to use it to say, "Oh look, here's a brief summary of the Gospel" or "My, what a good proof text for the doctrine of the Holy Trinity", rather than to pay attention to what's actually going on in the account itself. And so doing, they miss a lot of what the Lord has to say to us. So let's do something novel this morning and look at the text itself.

It's about a man named Nicodemus who was a Pharisee. Let me unpack that. The Pharisees were a religious and political party who were very conservative in their theology and their practice. The word Pharisee means "separatist" in the sense of being apart or away from something else. Specifically they rejected the creeping influence of Greek culture and ideas on Jewish society. They said, "We need to be a people set apart from the rest of the world. We need to zealously guard and maintain our own Jewish culture and traditions." And with this in mind they were fanatically devoted to the letter of the Law of Moses. They said, "God gave Israel the commandments. That's what makes us special. He chose us and called us to keep his ways; so it only makes sense that he also gave us the power to do it." And they tried to do just that: carefully keep all of the commandments of God. And to help make sure that they did, they set up all these nit-picky rules and regulations around commandments to narrowly and precisely define what constituted a violation of the law.

Just to give you an example, the Third Commandment requires that the Sabbath be set aside as a day of rest. Ah, but what does it mean to rest? The Pharisees could tell you. They worked it all out. They knew exactly how many steps a person could take on the Sabbath to keep the law. It was however many it took for you to get from your house to the synagogue and back, plus two or three trips to the outhouse. Any more than that, and you were working. Suppose you had a sore throat on the Sabbath. The Pharisees said that you were allowed to take some vinegar for it, but only if you didn't gargle. That would be working. Believe it or not, they even wrestled with questions like: could one eat an egg that was laid on the Sabbath, seeing as how the hen had to work to lay it? The answer they came up with: yes; but only if you intended to kill the hen for violating the Sabbath. Otherwise the egg had to be thrown out. Really. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. They had thousands of such rules. And by keeping them, the Pharisees really did believe they were obeying the whole Law of God. They

believed they were making God happy. And they believed that when the Christ appeared, he would destroy all the wicked (that is, all people who were not keeping all the rules and traditions of the Pharisees) and that he would elevate and reward them for their faithful obedience to God. Nicodemus was one of these; and the indication is that he was a good one, by which I mean he knew all the rules by heart and scrupulously tried to follow them.

He was also a leader of the Jews, which means that he was part of the seventy-member Sanhedrin: the governing council that ruled the Jewish nation under the authority of the Roman Prefect. So you might think of Nicodemus like you would a congressman or a senator. Therefore we can safely assume that he was well respected, well educated, and comparatively rich. He had everything going for him – except one thing: Jesus.

Jesus he just couldn't figure out. Here's this guy who appeared out of nowhere, it seemed – some village up in Galilee that no one's ever heard of. But now for the past year or so he's been all over the country preaching and teaching God's Word with great authority; he's performing miracles, driving out demons, and healing people. He's got a huge following. And people are openly wondering if he might be the Christ. Some *are* saying it – and small wonder because John the Baptizer got everyone stirred up by saying the Christ was about to appear. And then this Jesus shows up as if on cue. Word is that John even pointed at Jesus one day and said, "This is the guy we've been waiting for." So, there's all that on one side. But on the other side, Jesus is harshly critical of the Pharisees. He rejects our teachings and customs. Like John, Jesus calls all people to repent of their sins. And that makes sense for those who aren't Pharisees; they aren't keeping the Law of God. They don't even try. But it doesn't make sense for us, because we are. So, how can this Jesus perform miraculous signs that clearly display the power of God, and at the same time be so opposed to the very people who are striving so hard – and succeeding – to please God with their lives? It's a real mystery.

And we have to give Nicodemus credit. Faced with this dilemma, he goes to Jesus to find out. He goes seeking the truth. And of course with Jesus he's going to find it, because Jesus is the Truth. Now, some have suggested that Nicodemus is actually going to Jesus to try to trip him up in his words and discredit him like some did at other times; but I don't see that. No, he appears to be a man honestly trying to get the bottom of what is for him a perplexing problem. Those Pharisee colleagues of Nicodemus who wanted to discredit Jesus – and there were a lot of them – usually denied his miracles, or claimed that Jesus did miraculous signs by the power of the devil. Nicodemus doesn't do that. He readily admits that God is with Jesus. And that's the source of problem for Nicodemus: How can a man so obviously sent from God and using his divine power be so opposed to a good Pharisee like me?

We're told he went to see Jesus at night. And it could be that it's simply because they were both too busy during the day; but I rather think that this is a covert operation. Most of the Pharisees already hate Jesus. They've heard him teach and they've made up their minds. No one who says the things he does about us can be a man of God. So it seems more likely that in order to maintain his status among his peers, Nicodemus doesn't want them to know that he's been talking to the enemy. And that should have been a clue to him, by the way: by coming at night he's showing that he's more concerned with the judgment of men – how he appeared outwardly to them – than he is with what's really going on inside him and how God looks upon his heart.

Nicodemus begins by complimenting Jesus. He calls him "Rabbi", which is a title of respect. He says that he can see from the miracles of Jesus that he is a teacher come from God. And this is important: implied in what he says is that he knows a lot about God and the

way he operates in the world. And so Nicodemus thinks. But before he can get to his burning question about why Jesus is so hard on the Pharisees, Jesus interrupts him. “Nicodemus, here’s the truth: no one is able to see the kingdom of God unless he is born again from above.”

These are hard words to hear. Jesus is telling him that he only thinks he can see what is true in a spiritual sense; that he is in fact blind to the things of God. And he will remain blind until such time that he is born again of God. Nicodemus, not surprisingly, doesn’t understand what Jesus is talking about. He asks, “How can an old man be born again? Surely you don’t mean that he must reenter his mother’s womb and be delivered a second time, do you?” The question is absurd, and Nicodemus knows it; but it shows how wooden and rigid his thinking is that he takes the words of Jesus so literally – so much more in a physical sense than a spiritual one. But then Jesus clarifies: “Unless you are born again by water and the Spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Here Jesus speaks of Baptism; there’s no question about it. And as a Pharisee, Nicodemus knows something about Baptism. He knows that John called sinners to repent and to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins, and that Jesus too proclaims the same message. He also knows that the Pharisees (himself included) rejected John’s message. They refused to be baptized. They thought that Baptism may be the right thing for lowly sinners, but then it’s certainly not for righteous people like them who managed to keep the whole Law of God. And this is the root of the problem. Nicodemus, like the rest of the Pharisees, can’t see and therefore cannot acknowledge his own sin.

Last week was Pentecost, the day the Church celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit. And in the Gospel lesson from John 16, we saw that the first task of the Holy Spirit is to convict people concerning their sin. This is how spiritual rebirth begins: when the sinner is confronted by the true Law of God in all of its power, which is not a matter of adhering to mere externals like the Pharisees thought, but it’s a matter of the heart. It isn’t just “Do this” and “Don’t do that”. No, it’s loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind. It’s loving your neighbor as yourself. It’s about being always one hundred percent patient and kind and forgiving and helpful and generous to everyone you know and meet. It’s about never even for a second being rude or prideful or easily angered or lustful or envious or discontent. And it’s recognizing that anything short of that perfect standard is sin, damnable sin, by which the sinner defiles himself and justly earns the eternal wrath of God. This is what Jesus is getting to with Nicodemus. “You can’t see – you can’t understand – because you are resisting the work of the Holy Spirit to show you your own sin. And until you stop doing that, you will never see and you will never enter the kingdom of God.”

But what I’d have you see is that by confronting Nicodemus with these truths, Jesus is in the process of taking him out of the darkness and into the light. He’s opening the kingdom of God for him. As Jesus speaks to Nicodemus, the Spirit is working through his words to convict him in his heart of his sin. And thus his spiritual rebirth has already begun – it’s happening as Jesus speaks. And we know that it was completed because Nicodemus became a firm believer in Jesus. In fact, Nicodemus was one of the two men who helped take the body of Jesus down from the cross and who helped place him in the tomb.

Did this conversion happen all at once? Probably not; but we can say that Nicodemus must have been convicted of his sin to some degree. We know because Jesus then began to declare the Gospel to him. He reminded Nicodemus of that episode in Israel’s past in which Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness. God’s people were rebelling against the Lord, complaining about the way he was taking care of them, stubbornly resisting his guiding, and just

in general being ungrateful, unfaithful, and obnoxious. So the Lord sent deadly snakes among them as a form of judgment. The venom in the snakebites burned like fire, and many people died. Then the people repented of their sins and asked Moses to pray to the Lord to take the snakes away. The Lord did not remove the snakes; instead he provided a remedy for snakebite: the bronze snake on the pole that he had Moses set up. Anyone who looked at the snake was cured instantly.

In the same way, Jesus said, he would have to be lifted up – like that snake, a cursed thing – to suffer and die for the sins of the world so that everyone who looked to him in faith would also be saved from the curse and penalty of sin. There, on the cross, he would become sin for us and receive in his body the righteous judgment of God on our behalf. And by saying this to Nicodemus, Jesus was directing him not to look for righteousness before God in himself and in his own pathetic efforts to keep the Law of God; but rather to look to the perfect righteousness before God that comes by faith in the Son who was given in God's great love as the sacrifice for the world's sin.

Nicodemus the Pharisee came to Jesus seeking the truth, and he found it. And it's important that we know this because there is a remnant (at least) of a Pharisee lurking within each one of us. It's that part of us that wants to believe that we're good all by ourselves and that we are, for the most part, obedient to the commandments of God. It's the part of us that is self-deceived, self-justifying, blind to our own faults, and which sees no reason or need to repent. It's the part that always imagines that other guy's sins are so much worse than my own. It's the part of us that lives the lie that results in eternal death.

And that's why we, like Nicodemus, must always be seeking the truth that can only be found in Christ Jesus. Therefore may Jesus give us the grace and the will to go to him continually for his Word and his Spirit, that we may know his truth and that by believing in him we too may have eternal life. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!