

Trinity 2014 John 3:16-18

When Christians read the scripture, they always find the Trinity, if they look deeply. This is especially true of the stories. But it is not obvious. The trinity is a hidden mystery.

When three strangers visit Abraham's tent at the oak of Mamre, they foretell the birth of Isaac while eating the meal prepared by Sarah. So it gradually dawns on her husband that these are no ordinary strangers. He cannot distinguish among their identities. But we see them as Father, Son, and Spirit.

When Moses is tending sheep in the wilderness, he sees the burning bush. He goes closer and is told to take off his shoes. It is obvious to us that the fire is the Holy Spirit. The voice is the Word of God, which John's gospel equates with the second person of the Trinity. The Father may be the bush itself, without beginning or end. Or is he the holy ground, to be knelt on, not walked over? A famous theologian called God "the ground of being."

When David dances as the ark of the covenant is brought into Jerusalem, he himself represents the Father, who is the true king of Israel. In medieval thinking the ark of the covenant represented Mary as carrier of the divine savior. And the Holy Spirit? Well, he, or perhaps she, is the dance, the action itself. We might think of the famous blue Matisse painting of women holding hands and dancing ecstatically in a circle. The Holy Spirit draws us into the life of the trinity, where we join in their dance. We are meant to belong there and to enjoy it.

Fun, isn't it, to figure out these clever puzzles? The New Testament is easier. It is still a mystery, but in more obvious ways the trinity is there.

But it is not really something to spot, as in a child's game of hidden pictures. Not something to analyze as we do a work of literature. It's not even a something. We have to say "it" or "they," but no pronoun can stand in for what *they* are, what *it* is. More important than what it is, is what it *does*. The trinity's characteristic action is to reach down and sweep us up, to enfold us in its perfection and joy.

Nicodemus eventually figures this out. No character in scripture is more fully exposed to the trinitarian nature of God; perhaps no character has the subtlety of mind to appreciate it. That is why today's gospel gives us the conclusion of what Jesus told him. Nicodemus was the first to hear that God intends not to condemn but to save, that believing brings eternal life. He is given an avalanche of insights. The Son must be lifted up as the serpent in the wilderness was lifted up. The Spirit is like the wind which blows where it will; you cannot pin it down.

As I see it, the three persons of God are mirrored by three stages of Nicodemus's growth.

The first stage is the visit by night. We connect with Nicodemus's fear of being seen, his internal darkness, the risk in approaching a renegade. Nicodemus is a teacher in Israel, but does not know the first thing about spiritual reality. His willingness to admit this is very touching. "How can an old man re-enter the womb and be born again?" Jesus is maddeningly evasive. He speaks in riddles. If Nicodemus went away irritated, it would be understandable.

Stage two. Nicodemus keeps watching, from a distance. He must have felt uneasy, as many people do, who lead a double life. Representing the establishment, he was toying with a threat to the establishment. He did not instantly convert. But when his colleagues discuss how to dispose of this nasty problem called Jesus, Nicodemus advises caution. He could go that far, even if he could not commit, at least not yet.

Stage three. When his colleagues push through the crucifixion, Nicodemus does come forward, in an amazing and beautiful way. He leaves the darkness of his initial visit and enters the full blaze of understanding. It is an action of utter purity. One that we might envy, from an adult life that is usually a matter of compromise. When Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for the body of Jesus, Nicodemus is there too. He is Joseph's silent partner in reverence. In pictures we see Nicodemus behind the cross at the top of the ladder, carefully letting down the shroud to Joseph, who has the privilege of taking the sacred body in his arms. Even *behind* the cross, Nicodemus is making a reckless statement of the sort of belief that saves. He brings *one hundred pounds* of precious spice to anoint the body of Jesus—he goes for broke. Together he and Joseph put him into the tomb from which Jesus will burst forth on the third day.

You can see the room in which Nicodemus first met Jesus as the chamber of his soul. It is a place of turmoil and darkness. Over time this room expands and opens until it becomes the garden tomb. It becomes a light and airy space that frees and liberates. It is not only for Jesus. It is the incubation space from which Nicodemus bursts forth. Every Christian is meant to burst from the tomb as he does. To die, to rise, to experience glorification. To seeking, to consider, to step forward. These are the trinitarian patterns for our lives

The patterns are mysterious, easier to describe than to experience, easier to recognize in hindsight. They are gift of course, but there are things we can do to cultivate them. We want to feel the Father's power, as Jesus did; we want to be ignited by the Spirit's breath, as Jesus was.

We want to be drawn up into that great dance of the Godhead. It is less important to know what the Trinity *is*, than to know what it *does*, and how we join it.

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