

"Majesty and Mystery"
The Feast of the Holy Trinity
26 May 2024
Trinity+St. Peter's Episcopal Church
26 May 2024

Isaiah 6:1-8
Canticle 13, Psalm 29
Romans 8:12-17
St. John 3:1-17

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Alan Jones, former Dean of Grace Cathedral, in San Francisco, in his wonderful book on Anglican Orthodoxy, sets a tone that I think we need to adopt as we approach Trinity Sunday, and as we think about the complexity of Trinitarian thought. He writes,

"Orthodoxy invites reverence before mystery and the ability to hold the paradox of knowing and not-knowing at the same time in silence and in adoration. Orthodoxy opens horizons. It invites us to a banquet. It does not imprison us in a fortress."^[1]

There are several things in this quote that I think help the average person sitting in the pew or standing in a pulpit on this Sunday and ruminating over the notion of the Holy Trinity. I even think that it might help the preacher who will have to push beyond her own musings and actually say something about the Trinity – something that will lift up the idea in a parishioner's mind and allow them to "see" God. I especially like his notion of "knowing and not-knowing", a condition that encompasses all of us as we approach the Holy Trinity. He adds to that spectrum a similar one, known to the prophets as well, "time in silence and in adoration." I am thinking especially of Elijah sitting in a rocky cave on Mount Sinai waiting for a stupendous experience of God, but who ultimately finds him in a still, small, quiet voice, a light silent sound.

Our worry on this Sunday is one of desiring to understand the impossible, to hear the light silent sound. The readings for this day are laced with wonder and praise, and also with question and mystery. To answer it all is beside the point. To sit or kneel in wonder is spot on. So, with Isaiah, who has a vision of the Lord seated on high surrounded by the song of the cherubim and seraphim, the Psalmist who listens for God's voice in the waters, the breaking of the cedar trees, in the leaping of a calf, in flames of fire, in the voices of the many crying "Glory!", the Three Young Men in Canticle 13 who cry out, "Glory to you, beholding the depths," Paul, and the Romans who cry "Abba, Father!" and Nicodemus in his dilemma, we are positioned, as Paul would say, somewhere between suffering and glory. Nicodemus was brave in asking his questions, and Jesus was grand in his adding to the mystery.

A final quote from Alan,

"Anglican orthodoxy begins and ends in prayer, in silence before the mystery. It is not anti-intellectual but insists on the joining of intellect with emotion, of praying, as the Eastern tradition has it, with the mind in the heart."

Perhaps the story of Nicodemus can help us in our knowing and unknowing the Holy Trinity. In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes four visits to Jerusalem, all of them to participate in Jewish festivals. With this account of Nicodemus, we have the first of these visits, on the occasion of the Passover. The pericope is hopeful in its approach. Jesus is approached by a Pharisee – a sign of dialogue and thoughtful conversation on the stuff of Jesus' ministry. It is a dialogue of contrasts, however, with Jesus' focus on the spiritual and Nicodemus' insistence on looking at mechanics and logistics. There is some significance to the time of the conversation, "*he came to Jesus by night.*" Our current worldview and experience would see this as a signal that this was a secretive and covert meeting. The real meaning and symbol here is that Nicodemus comes after sundown, at the beginning of a new day! Jesus will lead him from misunderstanding what Jesus has to say, into understanding and wisdom.

Nicodemus does not start from ground zero, for he already has experience with and understanding of Jesus. But there is more, and that is the stuff of difficulty for Nicodemus. It is about origins. Jesus wants us to be born from above, born again. Nicodemus can only perceive that in mechanistic terms, not in spiritual terms. Mere life is not enough – there needs to see a vision of being born in and related to God. Paul's commentary in Romans (see Second Lesson) moves in this direction. What is the witness that has been made in the Scriptures? Jesus gives the example of the serpent raised up in the wilderness for healing and deliverance, and then gives the famous passage that comments on his being the gift God gives the world for the purpose of salvation. It is the gift of water and of the Spirit – a baptismal understanding.

All of these aspects and gifts of God are somehow bound up in the Church's understanding of the Trinity. It is really all about a relationship, our relationship with God, and God's relationship with Godself, the flow and movement of God toward us and with us. As we understand more and more about quantum physics and the "real" nature of atoms, and subatomic particles, we have a vision of the relationship of all things. It is that mystery that the Trinity approaches. Now we simply need to bow before the mystery.

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