

Today is Trinity Sunday, the only church festival I can think of that celebrates a theological doctrine rather than an event in the life of Jesus and his disciples. And I might add it's about the somewhat confusing, mysterious doctrine of our Christian belief that God is three persons in one being - not three gods, as it often seems to Jews and Muslims, but a single God of three persons, Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit.

And this three-in-one God is responsible for our universe from the Big Bang to the present and until the end, creating everything, holding everything in being, moving in and with us for all eternity. The force that causes everything to exist is the love which goes round and round between and among the three persons.

I don't know if you've ever seen the icon of the trinity written by the Russian, Anton Rublev, in the 15th century. It shows three figures seated in a circle around an altar. They all look much the same, although the robes are different colors, and it pleases me that they all look somewhat feminine. They sit with heads slightly turned and bowed toward each other.

This is the icon which sits with a candle on the table in my prayer corner. Having spent years with this icon, I can testify that if one sits and stares at the work, there is a sense of being inside the circle the three figures create. It is, of course, a kind of metaphor rather than a print from a kodak camera. But sometimes we need a sort of representation as a jumping off point for our worship.

Another place to get a feel for Trinity is in today's passage from the Gospel of John. Here we are told of Nicodemus coming at night to talk with Jesus. Nicodemus is described as a leader of the Jews, and is sometimes preached about as though he is sneaking around at night out of fear of the other leaders. But I don't think that's a necessary conclusion. He seemed to want to have a real discussion with Jesus, which would be more difficult if they were surrounded by a crowd of other listeners or critics.

He addressed Jesus with the honorific of 'Rabbi', which suggests that he can learn from this man. And he goes on, "...we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." It is as though he wants to understand what has brought about the closeness that this amazing teacher has to God and God's will. 'Teach me, by your presence, who God is.'

Jesus' response is, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.... I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." In other words, 'I can't teach you about the Kingdom unless you come within that Kingdom'. Nicodemus says this makes no sense to him. Could he go back and start again in his mother's womb and come into the world entirely new?

You and I are part of a Christianity which has talked for millennia about being 'born again', so his hearing the words of Jesus in such a concrete way seems foolish to

us. But I think that Nicodemus, who was well versed in Torah and Rabbinic Teachings, knew metaphor when he heard it. No, the difficulty for him was that he heard Jesus only too well. If the Holy Spirit gets her hands on him, everything will change.

He knew what it meant to be one who had grown up steeped in the Law, the Prophets and the history of Israel. This is how he had shaped his life, formed as a Pharisee, chosen as a member of the Sanhedrin, known by the people for all that he had become. How could he start all over again, like an infant, knowing nothing? Such a drastic change would mean that all he thought he knew about God and the universe and others is insufficient for deep connection to God

Poet Bruce Maple put the question this way: 'how would it change your sense of what Jesus is saying if we re-cast it as "you must allow the seeds of the Spirit to enter your soul, germinate there, grow there, until finally they come forth in an amazing and God-filled way, and your very nature and your relationship to all around you is changed forever"? How does it affect our relationship to others, if we know that the way we deal with them might be part of the process of born-ing?"

And it's not as though Nicodemus could choose when and how God might act to change him. None of us can do that. Jesus is very explicit about the *ruach*, the breath of God: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." How would Nicodemus respond to this deep and terrible teaching?

We do not hear the outcome until the 19th chapter of the Gospel when he joined Joseph of Arimathea, another secret follower of Jesus, in taking the crucified body down from the cross and anointing it for burial with a vast amount of precious embalming spices. The Spirit has blown to a new course, a corner is turned, an old life dies and a new one is born. As The Reverend Andrew Prior puts it, "To be born of spirit is to risk this, it is to recognize our absolute poverty, to look unflinchingly upon our mortality, and to stand alone before Jesus' death, and our own, and trust. And we will live."

So let me take us back to the Rublev Trinity. Apart from the main center in the three figures around the altar, there is also a small rectangular opening in the front of the table. It is meant to represent our opening to enter into the heart of the Trinity. As though where we actually belong is in the very midst of the three-and-one God. That would certainly be a birth into something profoundly new.

Perhaps this is one of the most important things we can learn from the theology of the Trinity - that we are not created to be mere observers. The God who is completely love, who created us out of and for love, who holds us every moment in eternal love, doesn't want us to merely think about all this. We are called to enter into the being of love, into the heart of the cosmic God who is our true center. This is the

profound change that brings us truly home to ourselves, to each other and to Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit.