

Trinity Sunday

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Introduction

As Jesus and Nicodemus meet in the night time, Jesus is quizzed on questions of doctrine and faith, of 'being born from above'. As we consider transformation from shadow to light – in ourselves, in our church and our world – we consider the wisdom of this conversation for our world today.

Text

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, 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.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." 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.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?' Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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.

The story of Jesus meeting with Nicodemus is the story of two men who ought to be in deep conflict. One, Nicodemus, the leader in the Sanhedrin community, and a Pharisee; the other, Jesus, the leader of a rebel, seemingly uncontrollable, and as-yet unnamed sect.

Nicodemus would have been settling in for a deep theological conversation with Jesus about what it meant to be saved. Jesus' message was at best confusing – at worst deeply unsettling for Nicodemus: “truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Conversion, being born again – re-forming – was essential for everyone, Nicodemus included.

The darkness of the night, surrounding the men, and surrounding their conversation perhaps reflects the uncertainty of the times – both religious and political. Times not unlike our own times of religious and political flux.

This text offers us three invitations to transformation:

The first invitation is to a transformation of the heart – an inner transformation. Both Jesus and Nicodemus were willing, despite the conflict between themselves and their faith traditions, to enter into a conversation about the depth, and differences of their faith. The art of honest, gracious conversation with someone different from ourselves is a crucial first step in conflict transformation. As is the art of honest, gracious conversation with ourselves about how we respond to conflict.

Henri Nowen has written on the call to be a ‘Wounded Healer’ – that to be a healer of others, it’s first important that we know what it means to heal ourselves, to be in need of our own healing.

And so it is with conflict transformation.

To be a healer of conflict, it’s good to know what conflict feels like from within – to explore our own inner wounded-ness, and to understand our own responses to conflict and difference.

If we can love ourselves, be gentle and honest with ourselves about our own responses to conflict, then the transformation, the ‘born-again-ness’ we seek in the world will be so much more sustaining and sustainable.

A second invitation is to the transformation of our church. Both Nicodemus and Jesus were deeply engaged in shaping their own particular faith communities.

I discovered a truth about church transformation a number of years ago. It was a warm summer’s day in 1990 – and we were resting from our work. A faith-based team from across Europe had joined together for a summer language school, while also building a new sauna for the local community.

Living in a hut on the White Plains of eastern Poland, not far from the border with Russia, we were a mixed bag of trainee theologians: Baptists, Orthodox, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics and Methodists all in our 20s. Over the evening campfire, talk turned to belief, theology and eventually baptism. In the heat of the flames I found myself arguing my Presbyterian, reformed line of thought on baptism fiercely.

In a lull, I realised I was arguing for a concept about which I really understood very little. I was taking time to push my line, rather than to learn about my friends' "experience of Light" as the Quakers say.

That was a turning point for me, after which I realised that to live out my passion for unity in the church I had to be prepared to set aside my own beliefs, my own tradition, for a while in order to hear those of others.

For deep transformation to take place, we need leaders in our churches, lay and ordained, willing to set aside the particularities of our own faith traditions to focus on a deeper, wider, broader unity, or *oikoumene* which transcends and embraces all difference.

And the third invitation is to a global transformation.

In the night-time of our world – that liminal space, between dusk and dawn – we might experience, like Nicodemus, a sense of vulnerability, anxiety, uncertainty.

Our legacy as Christians in the world is marred by stories of crusade, violence, abuse, bullying and aggression. For these things, and for much more in our troubled history, we seek forgiveness.

Alongside stories of violence there are also stories of peace makers of faith. If the church needs spiritual leaders, at ease with conflict, difference and diversity, then our world needs such leaders even more.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Liberia, South Africa and others remind us that many great hearts and minds have, over decades, worked tirelessly for reconciliation through attentive listening, forgiveness, and the grace of God. [The Forgiveness Project](#), [The Forgiveness Challenge](#), and [Global Elders](#) such as Mary Robinson, Desmond Tutu, Kofi Annan and others remind us that many great, faith-full people are still putting their energies into this task of peace and reconciliation.

Each one of us can be a reconciling reconciler, or 'global elder' as each one of us is called by God to be a peacemaker.

Response

Transformation, or 'being born from above' doesn't necessarily mean giving up what you believe, your tradition, your own story – but it may mean being willing to listen to the story of 'the other.' What experiences do you have of listening to someone with opposing beliefs to your own? How have you felt, in conversation with them? What new insights have you gained in their presence?

In the liminal space, the 'night-time' of your life, when there may be uncertainty, or questions that rock you to the core, to what truths do you hold? What kind of certainty do you seek? As you look around the world today, consider what certainties, what truths our world leaders hold. Do they hold onto these certainties out of fear? Out of trust?

Prayer

Eternal Trinity,
three-in-one:

Guide us Holy God in the way of deep truth
so that we may dwell in certainty
not of fact but of faith;

Guide us Holy Son in the way of deep companionship
so that we may flourish in relationships
that free rather than fester;

Guide us Holy Spirit in the way of deep life
so that we may dwell in the sure and certain knowledge
of your love surrounding us
in shadow and in light.

Amen.