

Trinity Sunday

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Introduction

Since we have already visited Mark's explicit trinitarian theophany during Lent 1 with the baptism of Jesus, Trinity Sunday sees a further pause in our journey through his gospel. Instead we have this well-known passage from John – with its covert encounter, cryptic conversation, and possibly some of the most used and misused verses in the New Testament. The passage alludes in different places and ways to all three members of the Trinity – and both Jesus' way of handling this, and Nicodemus' struggle to understand how these elements cohere, offer pointers for us as we continue to explore and develop a spirituality of conflict.

Preparation

Read verses 2–5 in different translations – try to include the NRSV and the NIV and others as well if you can. An easy way to do this if you have internet access is on [biblehub](#): go to the webpage, choose the 'parallel' option, and then enter the text reference – you will be able to see a verse at a time in a whole variety of versions. Note any differences between them that strike you as significant. What, if any, difference do these make to how the verse might be read?

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.

Comment

This is a text which we visit on a number of occasions during the three year lectionary cycle. In fact we've already paid a visit earlier in year B. In this reflection

we will be looking mainly at the dynamics of the interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus, rather than dissecting the content of their conversation. You can find reflections exploring this from other angles [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

When reading John we always have to bear in mind that he has (like the writers of the synoptic gospels) a variety of agendas to serve in writing as he does – some explicit, others less so. So we are not being regaled with a simple narrative account here – details like that of the night-time nature of the visit are there for specific reasons. Nevertheless even if the story is told primarily through the lens of John's pre-occupations, it has useful insights for us into certain dynamics which are very relevant as we consider conflict situations.

Nicodemus is a figure of contradictions in his initial appearance here in John's gospel. At first sight it appears that he is open to learning more about Jesus – for all that he comes to him in secrecy. However the way in which he then sets up and pursues the conversation actually paints a somewhat different picture.

Firstly Nicodemus doesn't begin with questions – he starts by making a statement of what he 'knows' about Jesus. There are a number of Greek verbs used for 'to know' in the New Testament but two principle ones are *ginosko* and *oida*. However whilst *ginosko* indicates an active evolution of knowing – progress in knowledge, *oida* suggests a more fixed 'completed' knowledge*. Here the verb John chooses to use is derived from *oida*. So it's almost as though Nicodemus begins by drawing his line in the sand: 'Here's what I know – and I know what I know!'

The impression that he is looking for confirmation of a certain set of understandings rather than to have these challenged, expanded, or deepened is borne out in the exchange which then develops. It's here that we see the second notable thing – namely the way Nicodemus wants to assign a very narrow and literal meaning to Jesus' opening comment that an understanding of the Kingdom necessitates a form of birth. The word Jesus uses here – *an then* – can mean a variety of things: 'again'; 'anew'; or 'from above'. It seems as though Jesus is testing Nicodemus' openness by using a phrase with multiple possibilities. Nicodemus settles for the most concrete (and implausible) option – physical birth: "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus has another attempt at directing him towards a different possibility of understanding. However the additional imagery and analogies – some of which Nicodemus steeped in the Hebrew scriptures would have been familiar with from the writings of Ezekiel (e.g. 11:19; 18:31; 36:26) and others from the natural world – seem to be of no avail: "How can these things be?" asks Nicodemus.

Finally Jesus seems to lose patience: "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" Notwithstanding this though, he has a third attempt – again making use of double meanings and drawing on another Old Testament story which Nicodemus might be supposed to know. John tells us nothing about Nicodemus' response to this further exposition and we see and hear nothing more (apart from a tantalising and suggestive glimpse in John 7:50) until he appears with Joseph of Arimathea (Jn 19:38–42) openly taking spices to anoint the body of Jesus. It seems then that somewhere along the line, doubtless with the help of the unruly Spirit of whom Jesus spoke to him, he made the transition from *oida* to *ginosko* with respect to God's kingdom – crossing his fixed line into more expansive understandings. This journey of evolving knowledge and understanding is one which John repeatedly shows us during the course of his gospel as various different characters encounter and enter into conversation with Jesus.

In this particular instance one striking feature is the contrast between the approaches of Nicodemus and Jesus to knowledge and understanding – and the invitation into it. On the one hand we seem to have something of a fixed position –

both with respect to meaning and to willingness to consider other possibilities: Nicodemus starts by firmly demarcating his understanding and then resists all attempts to have it expanded. Three times Jesus tries to help him using a variety of different approaches – fluidity of language, variety of analogy and finally, when all else fails, providing him with a completely different starting point – but to no avail (or at least to no immediately discernible avail). Nicodemus concretises the possibilities and resists the analogies. Expansion and contraction go head-to-head and it seems in this instance, for the moment at least, that the latter prevails

So how might this perspective speak to us in the context of conflict? I want to suggest that it raises a number of helpful questions for further consideration:

Firstly – does the way we hold or express our understandings of particular situations help or hinder us in dealing with any conflict connected with them?

Secondly – to what lengths are we prepared to go to try and find ways of either opening up, or responding to, different approaches to dialogue or the exchange of ideas and understandings? A whole range of brilliant suggestions for this have been put together by the Courage Pentecost project and can be found on their website [here](#)

*Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words

Response

Consider doing one of the following:

Identify a situation in which you are directly involved where there are difficulties because of different understandings of the underlying narrative or events. Reflect on your role in/responses to this in light of the above questions.

It is salutary – and not a little ironic – to reflect on how Jesus' words in v3 continue to be tied down to very particular meanings in connection with theologies of salvation – and of the ongoing consequences of this. There are a number of conflict situations currently prominent within the church (understood in its various different forms) – matters relating to gender and sexuality, the role of women, marriage etc. Take some time to explore one of these in greater depth – reading position statements and arguments from all sides and reflecting on these and your own responses to the issues in light of the above questions.

Explore the possible actions suggested on the Courage Pentecost [website](#) and choose one or more to put into practice.

Further Reading

Jesus,
you were always open
to conversation and debate
even in difficult circumstances.
May we too
be generous and hospitable
whenever we engage with others –
especially where there are differences
of perception or perspective –
so that we can grow
in mutual understanding
and open up fruitful possibilities
for moving forward.

Amen