

The Feast of the Holy Trinity, A✠D 2008

John 3:1-17 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 What is faith? From where does it come? What does it do? St. John began his account of the Holy Gospel, the account from which today's reading comes, noting this about Jesus: "to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (1:12-13).

2 And in the verse immediately preceding today's Gospel pericope, St. John records, "many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man" (2:23-25). Many believed in Jesus, but He did not give Himself to them. They believed in Him as a miracle worker, having seen the wonderful things He was doing: making water from wine, driving moneychangers out of the temple, doing many other signs and miracles. But just believing in these miracles is not faith. According to St. John, it's false belief. The kind that Jesus rewards by withholding Himself.

3 Remember what Jesus did when the crowd of thousands had been fed to the full from five small barley cakes and two pickled fish? Seeing that the crowd was believing in the miracles, wanting to make Jesus their bread-king, Jesus withdrew Himself, hid Himself from them. He rewarded their false faith by hiding from them.

4 It was because of the signs that Jesus was doing that Nicodemus approached Him. “We know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs unless God is with him.” But thinking of Jesus simply as a great teacher won’t do. It’s not faith. Jesus responds, “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” But Nicodemus’ false faith needs more than that. He wants to understand. “How can a man be born again when he is old?” It seems downright silly. “Can he climb back into his mother’s womb?” But Jesus doesn’t answer Nicodemus’ question “How?” Instead, Jesus gives him the “What.” “Being born again, Nicodemus, is being born of water and the spirit.”

5 Faith is not comprehension. Unbelief seeks to understand, to ask “How can these things be?” But not faith. Today is the Feast of the Holy Trinity, a relatively late addition to the Church’s calendar because all Sundays celebrate the Holy Trinity. But this Sunday is a day to contemplate the mystery of the Triune God. You confessed, “Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic faith...And the catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance.” If you expect the Athanasian Creed to explain the doctrine of the Trinity to make it comprehensible, you’ll be sorely disappointed. It doesn’t explain. In fact, it highlights the mystery of the Trinity. Three persons in one God. “The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one.” If you think you comprehend the Holy Trinity, or if you think that understanding the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is a requirement of faith, you’re wrong.

6 Do not marvel that Jesus says to you, you must be born again. “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” If

you cannot understand earthly things, Nicodemus, like how the wind blows or what lies beyond the range of the strongest telescope, how can you understand heavenly things?

7 Repent of making faith in Jesus a matter of understanding. Repent of treating Jesus as merely a miracle worker or simply a great teacher. Repent of allowing things you cannot understand—like the unity of the Trinity or the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity—to cause you to doubt the faith you have received. Repent of making faith a matter of comprehending. It's not. It's a matter of apprehending, of seizing, of taking hold. Faith clings to Jesus Christ alone.

8 St. Paul's faith does not rest on his ability to make sense out of God. "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Rom 11:33-36). Neither does yours. You can't. You'll never understand the Trinity. God is, after all, your creator. And how can a creature comprehend his creator? And you'll never figure out the mystery of the incarnation. But you may grasp it by faith.

9 Faith is a gift. It's not a gift of comprehending; it's a gift of apprehending. And it comes from the union of water and the Spirit in the font of Holy Baptism. Be born again, if you want this faith, Nicodemus. Receive the faith like an infant would receive it. Those who deny an infant's ability to receive the Lord's gift of faith in Holy Baptism are as incredulous as Nicodemus, supposing that faith is a matter of answering the "how" question. It's not. Jesus doesn't answer the question of how in Holy Baptism sinful people receive the new life of faith. He answers the "what" question. What do you here receive? Faith and forgiveness of sins, seeing the kingdom of God.

10 What is the content of that catholic faith? God the Father loved the world so much that He sent His only begotten Son, God the Son, that whoever apprehends Him by faith will have

eternal life. As the Israelites stung by the venom of snakes looked to the bronze serpent on the pole and were healed, not by their action, but by their faith in the God who delivers from death, so everyone stung by the venom of sin who looks to the Son of Man lifted up on the cross of Calvary, by faith in the God who saves from sin and death, will have eternal life. How can this be, that God would die for men, that God would be joined with human flesh, that the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross would mean the salvation of the world?

11 No, beloved, not “how?” but “what?” What has God done for you? The Holy Trinity is God for you, for your salvation, for your benefit. He requires nothing of you, not understanding nor comprehension. But He gives you the what, the faith he requires. Faith in Jesus your Savior the Son of Man lifted up on the cross for your sins. Faith delivered to you in the waters of Holy Baptism. Faith that is preserved by the word of forgiveness. Faith that is fed by the Body and Blood of the One in whom you have faith. Faith that—confessed or unconfessed—is a gift from the Lord.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
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