

Trinity
7/6/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 6:1 – 8

Psalm 29

Romans 8:12 - 17

John 3:1 - 17

Living the mystery that is God

In his novel *La Symphonie Pastorale*, set in the 1890s, Andre Gide tells of a relationship between a Protestant pastor and Gertrude, a girl blind from birth. The pastor tries to convey to Gertrude such things as the beauty of the alpine meadows and the majesty of the snow-capped mountains. He tries to describe the blue flowers by the river in terms of the colour of the sky - only to realize that she cannot see appreciate the comparison. He is constantly frustrated by the limits of the only tool at his disposal: words that can never fully express the vision of what he can see. Then an unexpected development occurred, an eye specialist in a nearby city said he believed the girl's condition was treatable. She went for an operation and three weeks later returned to the pastor's home, able experience for herself the sights he had tried to convey to her. She said: '...my eyes opened on a world more beautiful than I had ever dreamt it could be'. The pastor only had words, patiently and clumsily applied. But the world the girl lived in called out to be experienced rather than merely described. (*The Unknown God*, Alister McGrath pp 37-39)

On most Sundays through the year we tend to focus on a theme related to a story or an event. Trinity Sunday is a little different because it focuses on an idea about the whole of God: One God in three persons. Trinity Sunday seems like an occasion to focus on definitions or complicated technical explanations, but that would be a mistake. Trinity is fundamentally about how we discover and experience God, not about how we describe God. A 19th Century theologian said: ... "*the rudest man or woman who cannot reason about the Trinity may know the Trinity more perfectly than some actual theologian who has by heart all the controversies of the first six centuries*". This is not a statement against doctrine. It means that ordinary people are able see that Trinity Sunday, as every Sunday, is an occasion for re-engaging God's relationship with us and with God's work of loving us into being out of nothing, a gift given from the beginning of the world. Trinity Sunday is a day for remembering what it means to live the mystery that is God, a mystery that is primarily about God, and only secondly about us. It is a day on which we are once more exposed to the call to live "from above": according to the Spirit, not according to the flesh, something both St Paul and St John are concerned with.

Life according to the "flesh" is life lived in and for itself, regardless of God and possibly in contradiction to God. This does not mean a life of speculative atheism. It means actively challenging God's right to be God, and seeking to enthrone ourselves in God's place. In biblical terms this style of life is understood to lead to death: a life that is closed to self-transcendence, that relies only on its own resources and is driven by fear, not trust.

On the other hand life according to the Spirit is lived in the power of the reconciliation disclosed in Christ, who liberates us from reliance on self, offers us a new beginning in a deeper, larger context for living, and sets us free for serving others. Paul says: those who allow the Spirit to direct their life become children of God. He means they are embraced in a special relationship of trusting intimacy with God, reflected in the cry “Abba” -“dear one”. In one sense this is about the attributes of God, but primarily it is about entering into a new quality of life that is born of having confidence in God’s goodness towards us.

The choice between life according to the Spirit and life according to the flesh is what faced Nicodemus. He came to Jesus in a state of darkness but was not entirely without light. He was not antagonistic and his response shows a certain fragile sense of recognition: “*No one can do the signs you do apart from the presence of God.*” [v. 2] Nicodemus could see something “other” was present and at work here, but his level of belief didn’t seem able to reach beyond technological definitions. One writer (Moloney) says: “he knew too exactly”. He was bound by his own definitions. John Wesley might have said: he had the form of religion, but was not yet filled with its life.

Jesus says: “*No one can see the Kingdom without being born from above*” [v3]. Nicodemus has an inkling of Godly wisdom, but he can’t comprehend of Jesus’ response. “Born from above” stumps him because it joins two things that don’t seem to go together: birth and heaven: below and above. Jesus tries again: to live in the Spirit is like entrusting oneself to a power comparable to the wind, the source and destination of which is entirely beyond human control. This analogy, already familiar in Judaism, didn’t work. Nicodemus is unable to let go and enter into the ambiguities of metaphor and paradox required by heavenly knowledge. He is constrained by all things sensual: literal, observable truth. He is unable to let himself be reborn into a new way of living.

Through Jesus, Nicodemus is confronted by a revelation of the heavenly world, which uncovers the meaning of transcendent life, even while it paradoxically comes from below. This point lies at the heart of the Creed and is the one reason we should keep them: it is the truly human one who shows us who God is for us and what it means to enter into the life he offers, “from above”.

There is a still deeper paradox, which is found in the nature of the “heavenly revelation” disclosed by Jesus. It comes in the words “lifted up”, which are code for the crucifixion of Jesus and the exaltation of Christ. Two thoughts are present at once: one from below and one from above. According to John, the gift of life in the Spirit comes through gazing on the one who is “lifted up” and believing that **God is here for us:** in the midst of this ugly suffering and the scandal of his betrayal, this is the key to “seeing”. One reason faith is so hard to grasp from a human point of view is because the death of Jesus is revealed as the source of life. The real miracle is that in the place where the creatures of the Word of God reject their creator, saving love is present: God lifts up Jesus for us. Through the immense love of God, death itself becomes a sign of life. If we can grasp this point we begin to see what is hard to describe. And we come close to understanding why eating bread and drinking wine together have become signs for us of God’s gift of life to the world. Our community in the bread and wine are signs of whose we are and of who has given us life: life given to us in peace and reconciliation, instead of life taken from us in an act of vengeful appeasement.

In the dialogue with Nicodemus Jesus begins to address a wider audience. His lifting up is a gift to us that also asks us a question: what do we see in Jesus? Are we able to see in him the man for others, offering life to the world? Are we able to hear his call to go forward into God's transforming work of creating a community that lives in love for others? Our answer to that question involves judgment on our part. God's judgment has already been given: we are loved. The question for us is: do we see in that place the love that leads to life. If we do what is necessary is for us to rise up afresh and participate in what we see. God grant us the strength to do just that.
