

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 30th May 2021
Trinity Sunday

Collect

Holy God,
faithful and unchanging:
enlarge our minds with the knowledge of your truth,
and draw us more deeply into the mystery of your love,
that we may truly worship you,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.’

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: ‘Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!’

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’

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.'

Sermon

Today's readings present us with two contrasting stories of faith: the call of the prophet Isaiah; and part of the story of Nicodemus. I wonder how each of these stories might speak into our own faith stories.

Let's start with Nicodemus. Nicodemus only appears in John's gospel, and we encounter him three times. This morning's reading is by far the most that we hear about him. The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is typical of John's gospel – full of poetry; somewhat impenetrable; using double meanings and grand themes. It's worth taking a bit of time to draw some of the detail out of the story.

Even as the reading begins, our antennae are up, because Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. One of the favourite themes in John's gospel is darkness and light. So why is it that Nicodemus is presented as coming by night? And, as always, there are many answers. First, he is a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews. While the writer of John's gospel is certain from the outset that Jesus is God; the Messiah; the eternal Word made flesh, it is fair to say that others are not so convinced. They are cautious about Jesus. The way he is presented, it is almost as though people are drawn to him because of the deep truth in his words, coupled with the signs that he performs, yet they can't quite dare to believe that he really is the Messiah.

So Nicodemus, a leader, someone who is looked up to and expected to know things, is cautious. Intrigued by Jesus – perhaps on the road to being convinced – yet aware of the potential risk of being seen in his presence. And, recalling that theme of darkness and light, we can also recognise that perhaps as yet Nicodemus is unenlightened – he has not yet seen the light – at least not fully.

The exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus is far from straightforward. Nicodemus opens with a fairly clear statement. He suggests that the signs that Jesus has been performing signal his connection with God. Of course we can only imagine his tone – was he really already convinced by the signs and teaching, or was he hoping to put Jesus to the test? Probably Jesus knew which was the case. And as so often happens, Jesus takes the conversation in a different direction – perhaps to draw Nicodemus more deeply into the mystery of God.

Jesus focuses on what it means to come from God, and begins to speak of being born from above. Of course in practical terms we know that Jesus himself *was* born from above, because he was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Yet the exchange that follows explores the ways in which we, too, can think of ourselves as coming from God. Part of the literary confusion of this passage is caused by the Greek word *anōthen*, which means both “from above” and “again” – hence the reason why it sometimes speaks of being born again and at others being born from above.

I like to think that there is some irony in Jesus's voice when he says: ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’ Yet I also think there is a challenge. Jesus goes on to remind Nicodemus of what he has seen. From the very start of the conversation, Nicodemus claimed that Jesus's actions suggest that he is from God. Perhaps Jesus is challenging him to trust his judgement. If someone looks like they come from God; if they behave like they come from God; if they speak like they come from God. Well. Maybe they come from God.

And, on the two further occasions that we meet Nicodemus, we watch his faith grow. We observe the ways in which he takes up the challenge. He appears again in chapter 7 when there is further debate about whether Jesus is genuine or an imposter. On this occasion Nicodemus speaks openly, saying: 'Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?' While he is not yet prepared to nail his colours to the mast, he is clearly signalling that Jesus needs to be heard before he is judged.

Then, after Jesus's death, it is Nicodemus, along with Joseph of Arimathea, who prepares his body for burial. Now he knows for sure where he stands.

I love the story of Nicodemus because his doubts and questions resonate with me, as does his desire to understand. Yet I am also inspired by the way, in the end, he takes a leap of faith without having answers to all of his questions. I like to think that he will have continued to wrestle with all that he had seen and heard, gaining insights into Jesus's meaning as he lived out his life in that faith.

Set alongside the story of Nicodemus, that of Isaiah seems almost straightforward. The description of an extraordinary vision of God, attended by seraphs, one of whom touches his mouth with a hot coal, cleansing him from his sin and guilt, so that when God then asks who should be sent, Isaiah responds immediately, "Send me." It's a story of conversion; of inspiration. And, as the book of Isaiah will demonstrate, the start of a life that will be far from easy or straightforward. And perhaps, just as we may find resonances in the story of Nicodemus, we can also recall moments of inspiration and clarity, like that of Isaiah.

One of the ways in which theologians have explored the doctrine of the Trinity is by discussing the relational nature of God. If God is made up of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, relationship is in God's very nature. And given that we are made in God's image, that must mean that our relationships are important to God – and should be important to us. Our relationships with one another, and our relationship with God.

Examining the stories of Nicodemus and Isaiah reminds us of the importance of other people in our faith – the ways in which we can inspire one another; the ways in which we can learn from one another; the ways in which we are similar and different; the ways in which our relationships can shape us and draw us closer to God. If we were to imagine a conversation with Nicodemus and Isaiah, we might recognise that we would learn different things from each of them, and probably also discover yet more as we listened to them talking with one another.

Nicodemus and Isaiah help us to understand more about our faith, and so do those people around us. On this Trinity Sunday, may we remember to share our stories faithfully and respectfully, and allow them to draw us ever closer to God.

Amen.