

## Sermon for Trinity Sunday

Sermon Text: John 3:1-15

*Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." <sup>4</sup> 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?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.*

1.

Christianity and the Church do not have good standing in Germany. A recent survey said: more than two thirds of the people here don't believe in a personal God. But almost half believe that there is intelligent life somewhere in the cosmos.

But there are also people who are honestly searching. One of them is introduced to us in the Holy Gospel today. Nicodemus, a scribe. One of the political and religious leaders of the Jews. He comes to Jesus secretly at night. He would like to learn more about God. He wants to discuss things with Jesus.

Jesus puts an end to the discussion right at the beginning: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

That means: exchanging opinions won't help here. Because the catch about the things of God is: all people – including you Nicodemus, who is religiously interested and committed – have too little knowledge about God, which could be easily be caught up. Nicodemus, the basic fact about all human beings is this: they are separated from God. They have no possibility of coming to God on their own. All discussion and thoughts about God are of absolutely no use. Because you, Nicodemus, and all people are from birth "flesh" Jesus says. Flesh – with this word Jesus doesn't mean here that we have bodies. It also doesn't mean that this body was something terrible that we had to overcome to get closer to God. Rather, with "flesh" Jesus means precisely this separation from God into which we are already born and that we cannot end on our own.

Jesus describes to Nicodemus the dichotomy in which human beings live. God created us that we should live once and forever in fellowship with Him. Jesus calls this: “seeing the kingdom of God” or “coming into the kingdom of God.” That is the actual goal, the high point of our life. A life that finds no fulfillment in the participation of the kingdom of God is a life that hasn’t reached its purpose. The individual may have achieved great things from a human perspective. He may even feel very good about that. But pure, unadulterated fellowship with God is the fulfillment of our lives. Yet, we have no chance on our own of achieving this goal, for which we were actually created.

These facts must be called out. It’s not about –like in the survey—whether or not someone believes in God. Nicodemus clearly did. And yet it must be told to him, as well as all believers and unbelievers alike: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Even an exemplary, educated believer like Nicodemus cannot reach the kingdom of God on his own.

These facts must be called out again and again. In Friedrich Schiller’s “Ode to Joy”, wonderfully set to music by Beethoven (which was also chosen as the anthem of the EU), it says: “Brothers - a dear father must live above the stars.” That is human wishful thinking that has little to do with reality. No dear father has to live there. God is not harmless either – if we think of Him occasionally or try to live decently. God is not a talisman for special emergencies, who doesn’t put barriers in our way when we stand before heaven’s door.

You can’t control the living God. Not even through beautiful poems and good music. God Himself must take action to change something about the situation.

2.

God changes something about the situation. He doesn’t leave Nicodemus sitting perplexed. Jesus tells him more about the living God: HE Himself has established the connection to mankind.

God didn’t just send us rules: how we should act so that heaven’s door is barrier-free. God came down to us Himself in Jesus Christ. God Himself overcomes the distance that separates us from Him since birth. God became man. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” writes John just two chapters before this account of Nicodemus. God comes into this world that is separated from Him. God Himself becomes mortal and dies Himself, so that it no longer has to be said of us that we missed the purpose of life. We should see the kingdom of God after all!

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” At that time, on account of their disobedience, the Israelites were threatened by deadly snakes until Moses put up a bronze snake at God’s command. Whoever was bitten by the snakes and then looked to this bronze snake would live. With that, Jesus wants to say: He comes to save us from being eternally lost. Therefore He also lets Himself be raised up, lets Himself be brought to the cross, and there suffers our eternity of being lost. We will be saved only by looking to Him, the crucified Christ and placing all our hope on Him.

3.

Do we take this for granted? “We know this already,” children sometimes say honestly when I tell them a familiar Bible story. In contrast, Nicodemus didn’t understand anything at first. Unintentionally, he provides an example of the fact that we human beings cannot come to God on our own. We can only get there through a new birth, Jesus says.

We are born again in Holy Baptism, born again of water and Spirit. Through Baptism, we are already born here and now into this new life, which even death cannot destroy. The Holy Spirit worked in us and gave us faith. By ourselves, we didn't have this possibility.

We are born again. Our salvation doesn't depend on what we feel, understand, or do. Our salvation consists in the fact that God revealed Himself to us as the Triune God. He secured our salvation. If Christ Himself were not God, then He wouldn't be a bridge between His Father and us. If the Holy Spirit were nothing more than a pious feeling, then He couldn't do what is only possible to God: give us new birth into life with God.

When we speak about God, we can only speak about Him as the Triune God. This includes: talking about our salvation, about what God did so that we would not be eternally lost.

Some things in life need a lot of time to grasp their depth. Love is one of those things, as well as life experiences. Certainly, the mystery of the Triune God as well.

St. John later reports that Nicodemus is also there at the burial of Jesus: he helps anoint Him. With Nicodemus we see how God can even take someone who understands nothing at first, and through the Holy Spirit, can create believers in Him, the Triune God. We are each an example of this. The name of our congregation in Latin joyously reminds us of this: St. Trinitatis. Amen.