

Evening Prayer, Trinity Sunday 2010 — Exodus 3:1-15, John 3:1-17

*Holy Spirit, you make us alive;
bless also this our gathering,
the speaker and the hearer.
Fresh from the heart it shall come, by your aid;
let it also go to the heart.*

Søren Kierkegaard

Once upon a time there were three bears... So begins the innocent story some of us were told as toddlers, a tale of animals fluent in English, porridge, and an inquisitive but charming little girl with long, golden hair. Generally, we didn't have problems with this story. For some reason or another, children could cope in those days with talking animals; porridge was something you cooked in a saucepan (and incidentally tasted far superior to the modern microwaveable version), and little girls with long curly hair were thought by their mothers and fathers to be rather beautiful, and by their brothers, creatures to be politely tolerated. [Later on, of course, other boys' sisters were viewed somewhat differently...]

And the three bears themselves, of course, were accepted by children as individuals within a family unit similar to their own, with relatedness between father, mother and child.

In the 1930s and 40s, a mother would naturally expect to have less and cooler breakfast porridge than her husband, since he would be served first with the lion's share (he went out to work, after all!). Baby's helping would always be "just right", and mother would have whatever was left. So everything in the story followed acceptable patterns, which made it entirely believable to a child.

The inter-relatedness of the three divine persons revealed by Jesus to Nicodemus in our reading, is at least as difficult for adults to grasp (and possibly more difficult) than the story of the three bears. With the nursery story, the only real obstacle to belief is a family of intelligent, talking bears. With the trinity ('trinity' is not a Bible word, incidentally) we somehow have to get our heads around a being who is —at any given time — both one person and three.

And these three persons are each independent, and at the same time inter-dependent upon each other. They always, always work in total agreement and accord, which, by any stretch of the imagination, cannot be said of any human grouping or triumvirate (nor, one ventures to suggest, of any trio of talking bears!).

We read in Exodus how God told Moses that his name was I AM, a name which, particularly in John's Gospel, was frequently on the lips of Jesus. By claiming this name for himself a number of times throughout his earthly life, Jesus was clearly telling those who were prepared to read between the lines that he was, in fact, God — God the Son.

In Christ's conversation with Nicodemus, he taught that camera-shy Sanhedrin member (and us) how the three Persons within the Godhead interacted harmoniously and co-operated with each other in all their activities, and specifically here in John 3, in their enthusiastic and united involvement in bringing people to new birth. Small wonder that Nicodemus' response to this was *How can this be?* (verse 9).

The expression "born again" describes perfectly the effect on lives that have responded to Jesus and been touched by his Spirit. Unfortunately, western society has hijacked the phrase and turned it into a sneeringly derogatory epithet, a put-down. This may have come about through over-use of the expression by keen Christians, who wanted to set themselves apart from people they thought merely claimed to be believers, but in reality were not. Arrogance, to say the least, and yes, very unfortunate.

These verses from John are interesting because they throw up two or three uncertainties. At what point, for example, does Nicodemus depart though the night and go home? After verse 9 he seems not to be mentioned again until chapter 7, where he defends Jesus' right to a fair trial after an abortive attempt to arrest him. Then towards the very end of John's narrative we meet Nicodemus again, accompanying Joseph of Arimathea as they go to prepare Jesus' body for burial. He followed

Jesus to the very end, which encourages us to believe that you can be a faithful disciple without knowing all the answers.

Another uncertainty relates to ‘who said what’. If you were following the Bible text while Sue was reading, you may have noticed that the quote marks for Jesus’ speech are closed at the end of verse 13. There is a footnote in my Good News Bible which says that the quotation may go through to verse 21, but it’s all a bit uncertain.

As Jesus frequently used the title ‘Son of Man’ for himself, my own guess is that Jesus actually said the words in verses 14 and 15 about Moses lifting up the bronze snake in the desert. And it’s at least possible that the famous John 3:16 (and the verses that follow) are John’s comment on and summary of what Jesus said to Nicodemus.

But what about this bronze representation of a snake on a pole? Well, the story recorded in Numbers 21 tells us how the Israelites grumbled against Moses during their desert wanderings, and were punished by poisonous snakes invading their camp. Moses, true pastor that he was, prayed for the people who had been bitten, and God told him to fashion a model snake out of bronze, and then hold it up on a pole so that it could be seen. The snake-bite victims were to look up at the bronze snake — just look at it — and the poison would be neutralised, leading to their complete healing. The story illustrates the Lord’s very strong but justifiable attitude towards sin and disobedience, and also his tender healing love for offenders.

Jesus says that bronze snake is like him: *in the same way*, he said, *the Son of Man must be lifted up*. Later (chapter 12) he said something similar: *When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to me*. (And John adds, *In saying this he indicated the kind of death he was going to suffer*.)

A little problem arises here because the snake in Scripture is a symbol of evil. So how can Jesus lifted up like the bronze snake be a good, positive picture of God’s saving love! It’s a problem. But St Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians that *Christ was without sin, but for our sake God made him share our sin in order that in union with him we might share the righteousness of God*. Jesus identified with sinners too when he was baptised, taking his place with them in the water of repentance and cleansing. It’s all a bit subtle and mysterious, but for me anyway, it works.

I think we are intended to note also that this picture of just looking to Jesus crucified for us, links the new birth to **faith**. It is our positive response to what Jesus has done for us. “*Look and live, look and live,*” as we used to sing in our Gospel Hall days!

The hymn *Man of Sorrows!* links Good Friday with Ascension Day:

*Lifted up was he to die.
It is finished! was his cry;
now in heaven exalted high;
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

Jesus was not just lifted up to die — the Father lifted him up from a dark tomb into a bright and glorious garden. After further teaching and commissioning of his followers, he was finally lifted up in glory! Luke tells us that at that moment, *They worshipped him...*

It is not for nothing that the Church of England has designated Ascension Day as a Principal Feast. If it does nothing else, it should certainly cause us to worship. Our Saviour Jesus has ascended to the right hand of God the Father, and in gracious concern for us the Holy Spirit has been sent — from Father and Son — to gladden us, to empower us, and to form Christ in us.

And this should lead to a further ‘lifting up’ of Jesus. As Jesus is exalted in our lives, and his likeness becomes more visible in us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, so men and women will be drawn to him because of what they see of him in us!

*Lift Jesus higher, lift Jesus higher, lift him up for the world to see.
He said if I be lifted up from the earth I will draw all me unto me.*

Amen.

Don Mason