

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

Trinity Sundayⁱ

Lessons:

The First Lesson:ⁱⁱ Here beginneth the sixth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱⁱ

“In the year that king Uzziah [uz-EYE-uh] died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:^{iv} Here beginneth the third Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.

“There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith {SETH} unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the

Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: *“There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”^v*

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

Homily:

There is an old saying: Don't ask the question if you are not willing to hear the answer. That was assuredly the case with Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews. The Pharisees were opposed to Jesus' message and His ministry and attempted from very early in that ministry to trap Him and destroy Him.

Yet Nicodemus did recognize—perhaps in a way his fellows did not—that Jesus could only do the things He did by virtue of being sent by God. Still, he was unwilling to be seen in public conversing with our Lord, who was the subject of contempt and bitter hatred on the part of most Pharisees. And so he crept in to see Jesus “by night” that he might address to Him certain questions.

At the root of the problem for Nicodemus was the legalistic manner in which he and the rest of the Pharisees viewed the world. They were the ultra-legalists of their faith and society, who found a rule and a law to govern every aspect of life. And—because they were influential in the processes of commenting upon the texts of the Scriptures, and in selecting which commentaries would be used to give guidance on the behaviors commanded or permitted by those Scriptures—the resulting interpretations tended to favor positions espoused by the Pharisees.

In this connection, you will recall Our Lord's denunciation of the care with which these Pharisees tithed even on such minor assets as kitchen herbs like mint and rue^{vi} while at the same time they devised what we might call “living trusts” to shield their major assets from their obligations to support their aging parents.^{vii} This is a situation rather familiar to those who find occasion to argue with those in our own government, where rules and law are made incomprehensible and biased in favor of the lawmakers, who write rules that apply to everyone but themselves, written in language that no one can understand, and grant themselves favors that no one else receives.

Because so much of what our Lord taught contradicted the Pharisees' claims, Nicodemus was unwilling or unable to comprehend the meanings of much of what Jesus had to say. He found himself flummoxed by the words of Jesus. At the same time, he could not deny the reality and power of our Lord's words nor the miracles He

performed. So, in posing his questions, he frankly admits his confusion: *“Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.”*

So Jesus led Nicodemus to the core of his confusion: *“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* Our Lord was telling Nicodemus that unless a man “re-starts” or recommits his life to God, then he cannot enter heaven. In our Baptism we say that we “die to sin”, and so in order to live after that death, we must be born again to freedom from sin.

When we surrender our lives in lifetime devotion to God, rather than to the wiles of the world, we are born again into faith. Unless we accept God’s rule of our life and His forgiveness of our sin, we cannot make this change. But Nicodemus could not understand our Lord’s words. *“Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?”* Nicodemus could not seem to draw the distinction between a physical being and a spiritual one.

So our Lord re-directed him and tried to clarify the issue: *“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”* But Nicodemus still could not understand. So our Lord tried another tack: He drew an example from the world around Him, one that everyone has seen and experienced.

“The wind^{viii} bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” Or in other words, you hear our words, you see our deeds, but you cannot explain them. This is because you are trying to judge the spiritual by physical rules.

None of your legal rules apply to the case, Jesus was telling Nicodemus. Those guided by the Holy Spirit will go and do what they will regardless of man’s concerns because they are acting in accordance with the will of God. Jesus suggests to Nicodemus that this is like the

wind, which people experience, by hearing and feeling, but which they cannot control, nor even determine the source nor destiny of.

And Nicodemus, still bound by his worldly view, could only respond, “*How can these things be?*” Jesus gently pricked the pride of the Pharisee, and asked in return, “*Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?*” Our Lord goes on to suggest that if Nicodemus and the rest of the Pharisees are unwilling to even consider the spiritual, then the discussion is pointless. “*Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?*”

The person who is born again of the spirit accepts faith. Faith allows us to accept things which we sometimes do not understand. Faith permits us to consider the realm of God, which we have not yet seen, nor experienced, and yet we can believe in it and act upon it. We can make decisions that literally change and govern our very lives based on faith.

Faith grants us the freedom from the constraints of the world governed and ruled only by the physical and corporeal. Faith permits us to accept the mystery of the Holy Trinity, which we celebrate this day. We do not understand how God can be at once three persons yet one, but our faith allows us an insight that physical human law cannot achieve.

Faith allows us to accept what Nicodemus could not: that we must be born again to enter the Kingdom of God. It allows us to not only believe, but then to act on these things that our Lord has taught us through the Scriptures.

Our faith allows us to be willing to hear the answers to the questions we ask.

Let us pray:

Eternal God of perfect Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, we know that we cannot understand all that Thou doest and willest for us. Grant us therefore, faith to accept always those things which are most expedient and needful for us as Thou knowest. Give to us the constant

assurance of Thy presence so that in Thy time we may join with the angels in Heaven. This we ask in Jesus' blessed name. Amen.

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The Rev. Mr. Larry Wagoner^{ix}

June 3, 2012

ⁱ *This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Mass on Trinity Sunday, 2012.*

ⁱⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Isaiah 6:1-8 (KJV).*

^{iv} *“Upon any Sunday or Holy Day, the Minister may read the Epistle or the Gospel of the Day in place of the Second Lesson at Morning or Evening Prayer.” Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

^v *St. John 3:1-12 (KJV).*

^{vi} *St. Luke 11:42.*

^{vii} *St. Mark 7:11.*

^{viii} *Both in the Hebrew that was the religious language of Jesus and Nicodemus, and in the Greek in which this Gospel was recorded, there is one word that means at once “breath”, “wind”, and “spirit”: ruach in Hebrew and pneuma in Greek. So this entire verse is at once a pun and a double entendre.*

^{ix} *Deacon, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church, serving at Holy Angels Anglican Catholic Mission, Picayune, MS, and Christ Church Anglican Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Metairie, LA.*