

Questions, Questions, Questions

Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on Trinity Sunday, May 30th, 2021 – John 3:1-17)

Welcome to Trinity Sunday. The day in which we celebrate our Triune God – a God who is one and three. A God who is in tri – unity. The liturgical colour of this season is usually green and where I grew up, we were told that this season from now until Advent which is in November was the season of growth. A time when we learnt more and more about who God is and how we relate to God.

Since I was a little child, I have been fascinated by this idea of God being three in one and one in three. I have listened to all the ways it has been explained – St. Patrick and his three-leaf clover, water being solid, liquid and vapour, eggs having three parts – shell, yolk and white. None of these really satisfied.

The whole idea is confusing and over the years I have had many many questions about it. I studied it in depth at college such was my fascination. I read all the experts – Moltmann, Kelly, LaCugna, Boff. I even wrote about the work of a Greek Orthodox priest whose work had been translated into English – perhaps reading the Greek version would have made more sense. I tried to get my head around the Greek philosophy used by the Cappadocian Fathers (early church scholars from Turkey) to explain the concept. I looked at art and icons trying to understand what it meant and still would say out loud in class – it just doesn't make sense.

I had so many questions, I was trying to understand things in a literal sense, I was pretty scared to voice my questions, but I also knew I need to come to some kind of understanding as somehow this idea was important to me and my faith.

In short, I was a bit like Nicodemus. Something stirred Nicodemus in the middle of the night, something made him restless, something made him leave his comfy bed in the middle of the night and seek a 'secret' meeting with Jesus. Maybe he was trying to make sense of all he had heard about Jesus' actions to date. Maybe he needed to see if indeed he really was the Messiah his people were waiting for. Maybe he needed to hear what Jesus had to say for himself in person. Maybe he had questions about his own religion and faith that he needed to explore. Maybe he had heard rumours about what others wanted to do to Jesus, who they saw as a trouble maker, and he wanted to warn him. Maybe he was having a crisis of faith.

Nicodemus is full of questions, he is seeking answers, he is sneaking around trying to find Jesus. Sneaking around so his friends and peers won't find out what he is up to. He greets Jesus and indicates he has been impressed with Jesus. Jesus then starts to give him an answer to his searching – if you want to see the Kingdom of God you must be born from above. Nicodemus takes this literally and argues with Jesus that this is impossible. Nicodemus has not understood Jesus and cannot step outside his own framework of understanding. Nicodemus is puzzled. Jesus then goes on to talk about the physical life, the spiritual life and eternal life. Nicodemus is beginning his journey of faith as he grapples with these ideas.

We will meet Nicodemus twice more in the gospel of John. The next time will be in Chapter 7, when some of the Pharisees want to arrest Jesus because Jesus had implied that he was the Messiah for whom they waited, Nicodemus speaks up and suggests bravely, that perhaps they need to give Jesus a hearing before they do anything.

The next time we meet Nicodemus is after Jesus has died. Along with another ‘secret’ disciple, Joseph of Arimathea, they ask and get the body of Jesus so he can be buried properly, giving him dignity. Nicodemus is no longer a ‘secret’ disciple, his love of Jesus is now on show for all to see.

The answers Nicodemus finds to his questions make a difference, they change his life, he deepens his faith.

The answers I found to my questions about the Trinity made a difference, they changed my life and how I understood faith. An understanding of the Trinity led me to understand that God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer welcomes me into their very being. The idea of Trinity contains a number of ideas – unity and diversity, mutual respect for others, being inclined to the other, the idea that who we are is only ever revealed to us by our relationships with each other. I digress, and these are ideas for another day.

The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus reveals some important insights. First, that God loved the world so much he gave us Jesus so we all might have life forever. Secondly, that God’s Spirit is with us, blowing where it will, offering freedom, energy, encouragement and peace. Thirdly, that faith and understanding such is complicated, but we might get into trouble if we take everything literally. Fourthly, that the church, that is us, we are a community born from above. Finally, that we are called to step outside our conventional understandings if we are to understand the depth of God’s love for us.

As we enter the long season of Trinity or Pentecost, may you find the courage to ask your questions about your faith. May the Spirit be your guide and teacher as you move beyond literal understandings. May your new understandings make a difference to the life you lead. May you celebrate the simplicity and the complexity of God’s love for the world and for you. Amen.