



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens
Trinity Sunday, May 30, 2021
Visit to The Parish of the Church of the Holy Trinity, White Rock
Patronal Festival and Centenary

I am delighted to be here at the Church of the Holy Trinity, especially on this Trinity Sunday and even more so as we mark the 100th Anniversary of the parish. I am so sorry that we are in this pandemic and that we are not able to physically be together. I know that these COVID restrictions have changed so many plans that all of us have had over the last 15 months or so but when we arrive at a historical date like this in the parish it is very disappointing not to be together to share in the Eucharist, the prayers, the singing, the peace, the fellowship and food afterwards. These are the very difficult moments when social distancing feels particularly painful. I am sorry about this for all of us but one day soon we will be able to worship God together and be in the presence of one another to encourage and build up the community of this congregation.

One hundred years is a full and rich history for a parish. As I thought about this, I wondered about what life was like back in 1921, here are a few things to ponder... The average life expectancy was about 59 years. Only 8 percent of homes had a telephone. The tallest structure in the world was the Eiffel Tower. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police had only been in existence under that name for one year. The first original White Rock pier was actually built in 1912 but that had to be replaced again in 1914, either way both versions were well over 100 years ago. In 1921 the village of White Rock had a population of about 500. The first Anglican service was on Easter Sunday, 1920 and was held in the school, and led by the Rev'd W.M. Holdom. The next year it was determined that a church should be built, and after the building lot was purchased, it was all volunteers, save for one paid person, who erected the first church. 68 people attended the service of dedication on May 1, 1921 with Archbishop dePencier presiding. Those were the humble beginnings 100 years ago. And the Holy Spirit has guided this parish in so many ways ever since.

The world is different now that is for certain. Thanks to the pandemic and technology of today, we gather here online and a few of us at the church, to give thanks to God for this parish, for the people that have gone before us. For the clergy and lay leaders who gave so much of themselves in response to their faith in God's love and God's hope.

The gospel passage linked to this Trinity Sunday was all about a religious leader in Jesus' time who came to our Lord in the cover of night. Nicodemus was his name. Nicodemus was searching. He was looking for greater meaning and purpose, a more profound clarity of knowing God's desires of him. He was searching for God's presence in the world, in his soul, in his thinking, in his praying. Nicodemus was trying to find what he had set aside his entire life to find: the nearness of God, the closeness of God, the vision of God, the holiness of God. He had pushed aside so many parts of his life to search for something that seemingly was proving quite elusive to him. He believed in God, he trusted in God, he hoped in God, but somehow the holy presence of God seemed distant to him. On the surface he knew what to do, the words to pray, the actions to follow, the correct posture, the correct words... but something seemed missing to him. He believed with his mind but his soul was not on fire with the Holy Spirit. He could intellectually understand faith in God but his heart was not filled with the presence of the Word of God that transformed him.

And so he went in search of the very thing that he had given his life to come closer to. He went out to find that which would fill that God-shaped hole in his heart. He went to be with Jesus who had clearly disturbed his spiritual thirst. The evangelist of John's gospel describes that Nicodemus went under the cover of night so that it was metaphorically clear that he was still in the darkness searching and fumbling and seeking.

And so they had this conversation in the dark, with Nicodemus hoping to discover the light. We just heard the passage read, but hear again some of the conversation these two had about the spiritual life.

Jesus said to 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 the Spirit."

Pause and think about those words with me. For they are the reason we have gathered today and why people have gathered here for one hundred years. It is about discovering what it means to be born from above, that is, spiritually reborn so that the Kingdom or the Realm of God suddenly becomes known and recognized by us. Our souls discover what is the essence, the core purposes of life, which is to know God and to be known by God. So many of us go through life searching for this very thing, the closeness of God but somehow we often cannot see what is right before our eyes.

I think that Nicodemus is us. He is just like all of us who try to make sense of how God works in this world. Just like us who try to move from a child-like faith to an adult faith. Who try to move from narrow definition of God to something far more expansive and rich, so that this world becomes alive with the kingdom of God.

And I like to think that what Nicodemus discovered in the darkness of that dark night long ago was the Trinity of God, three parts to God, three aspects of God, three images of God, three ways to know God... and then some. What he discovered is that God is not predictable, God is

not definable, God is not under his control, God is not only what he wants God to be, God is bigger and greater and broader than all of that. This to me is what the Doctrine of the Trinity is all about as well. Too often we Christians are not sure what to do with the Trinity of God, three persons but one God. Is it about three gods but somehow we remain monotheistic? As far as I am concerned it has nothing to do with this. The Trinity of God is about coming to know that God is more expansive, broader, wider, greater than we could ever ask or imagine. This is what Nicodemus discovered and what the Church of today needs to continue to discover.

The Trinity of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; the Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier really starts to expand what we understand about how God moves in this world. God is bigger than only male, or only female for that matter, greater than the Son of God, greater than the Holy Spirit. God is the start of all life, the beginning and the end, the Father, the Mother, the Child, the Spirit, the breath of life, the love of God, the voice over the waters, the creating God.

Let me share a quote from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin that seems to speak of this experience of the Trinity: "All around us, to right and left, in front and behind, above and below, we have only to go a little beyond the frontier of sensible appearances in order to see the divine welling up and showing through. But it is not only close to us, in front of us, that the divine presence has revealed itself. It has sprung up universally, and we find ourselves so surrounded and transfixed by it, that there is no room left to fall down and adore it, even within ourselves. By means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us and moulds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas in fact we live steeped in its burning layers...

"As Jacob said, awakening from his dream, the world, this palpable world, which we were wont to treat with the boredom and disrespect with which we habitually regard places with no sacred association for us, is in truth a holy place, and we did not know it."

One hundred years later the doctrine of the Trinity of God still speaks to us in how God continues to come to us and transform us and renew us; still comes to us and calls us reimagine the Alpha and Omega of God. Or as Isaiah phrased it, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory."

Trinity Sunday invites us to look deeper into what it is that we believe about God. Well it is more expansive than that as Nicodemus discovered. It is about discovering that we need to be born from above to see and know that the kingdom of God is all around us, before us, beside us, within us calling us to be people transformed in heart, body, mind and soul; transformed to suddenly see, as Nicodemus came to see, light in the darkness.

Even in this pandemic, even with the news of the Residential School in Kamloops, may we know God with us one hundred years after the first Anglican Church, the Church of the Holy Trinity, was built in White Rock and that God will remain with us for eternity.