

**Pusey House, Oxford
Confirmations, Trinity Sunday 2021**



Gospel

John 3.1 – 17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered 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 Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

Homily

'If I have told you about earthly things', Jesus said to Nicodemus, 'and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?' *John 3.12*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear Friends, today's liturgy invites us to praise God not for the wonders He has worked, but simply for the beauty and goodness of His Being from which His actions flow. We are invited to contemplate the sacred heart of God – love and life in communion. It is an astonishing day in the Church's celebration on which to be confirmed, because what the Church contemplates in its worship today makes every conceivable difference to our daily lives. The challenge to the preacher is not to make too much of an idiot of himself, and to sit down quickly. I'll try to do both.

Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus, which we've just heard as our gospel, shows us precisely the God we are talking about. 'God so *loved* the world that He *gave* his only Son ... so that *through* Him the world might be *saved* (Jn 3.16 – 17)'. This Son was *sent* – sent as the Son of *Man*, that is as one destined to suffer and die, so that when He was lifted up He could bring us to heaven, to the Father. The Son's journey is a unique journey: only He has come from God and returned to God. But what does it immediately tell us? but that the God of the Bible is not closed in on Himself, a single person, a solitary ego, loving Himself alone. Instead the One who sent the Son wants to communicate itself; He is openness and relationship itself. He is not a unit; but a unity of love and life!

Throughout Scripture, words like 'merciful', 'compassionate', 'faithful', 'rich in grace' all speak to us of a relationship with an essential Being who constantly *creates*, who *offers* Himself, *fills* every gap, wants to *give* and to *forgive*, to make a marriage bond, a lasting covenant. This is the God whom Jesus revealed, whose face shines from every page of the new testament. And today we say that this relationship is His *nature!* He is like this towards us because he is like this in Himself. 'Just as I *am*, and *know*, and *love* and yet am *one being*; ... just as the heat, power, and light of the sun do not make three suns, but *one*; just as water, air, and steam are all manifestations of the *one* substance; just as the form, color, and perfume of the rose do not make three roses, but *one*; ... just as one times one times one times one, does not equal three, but *one*: so too, in some much more mysterious way, there are three Persons in God and yet only one God.' (Fulton Sheen, *Divine Romance*).

The Good News is that this *communion of love* is the One who comes in search of us, His lost children. We tend to see our lives as *our* journey in search of God. And in some sense they are. Our restless hearts want to find Him, find rest in Him. That we have confirmation candidates treading the same path that all the saints have trodden before is proof.

But the truth that the scriptures reveal is that God seeks us *first*; God draws us to Himself.

As our Blessed Lord Himself said, 'No one can come to me ... unless the Father who sent me, *draws him*.' (Jn 6.44) He is the one who *calls to us*, who touches *us* with His nature: who gives Himself to our incomplete and searching hearts, that long for His goodness and peace.

Actually unless God draws us, we're doomed. When we search for love and identity and fulfilment on our own, we end up disappointed and frustrated. Our fantasies fail to remove our emptiness; and our bondage, and anger, and misery tighten their grip. Like a desperate man on a desert island we try to quench our thirst with sea water, not knowing (may be not caring) that its saltiness overwhelms us, poisons us, and only makes us even more insanely thirsty. Material possessions, ideologies and ambitions, and all the human loves that trap our desires, poison us; make us even more thirsty for life and love. We need the pure water that we long to drink: we need, as Jesus says, to be re-born, in God.

In his lectures on St John's gospel [Tract 26], St Augustine asks 'What does it mean to be *drawn by desire*? ... His answer is, 'There's a saying "Everyone is drawn by what he desires", not by necessity, not by compulsion, but by the *pleasure* in it. Surely then we can say that anyone who finds *pleasure* in truth, in happiness, in justice, in everlasting life, is drawn to *Christ*, for Christ is *all* these things.' Our desire for God – our restless, sometimes obscure and always stretching search for Him – happens because He *has already found us*. And when we realise that *our search* for God is only ever a *response* to His having *found us* in Christ, and having *put the Spirit of Truth in our hearts* to cry 'Abba Father!' will we be able to take up the cross and follow every step of the way where our desire and longing for God will lead.

It is Christ, who has been set before us by the Father, who succeeds in drawing us because it is *our* nature to hunger and thirst for nothing more than for love and truth. 'We are hungry', to quote Augustine again, 'to eat and drink wisdom, justice, truth, eternal life'. God's grace *gives us confidence and freedom* to step forward, in prayer and worship, in penitence and single-minded dedication, in lives of sacrifice and costly service of others, including strangers and enemies, undeterred by difficulties or obstacles that come from our sin, knowing that *nothing* can deflect or weaken God's will and grace at work within us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.