

The Holy Trinity: John 3:1–17

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“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

That’s the question of the day from Jesus to Rabbi Nicodemus. And it’s for us too. There are two perspectives to this life and to this world – from below and from above. There are also two religions in this world – the religion from below and the religion from above. The “from below” perspective is our perspective, the world as we see and experience it. It’s a world of cause and effect, a world that at times seems arbitrary and capricious, an “eat or be eaten”, “survival of the fittest” kind of world in which might is right and the strongest, smartest, fastest survive. The “from below” religion is a religion of the law, a religion of principles, of methods, of exercises, of things you do to gain control over your life, others, the forces of nature, whatever.

We are born “from below” creatures. We are children of Adam, the man of the dust. Dust we are and to the dust we will return. True, we are God’s handiwork. The hand of God made Adam from the dirt like a master craftsman making a piece of precious pottery, but except for a few verses in Genesis, we’ve lost all memory of that. We have no intrinsic knowledge of what is “from above.” We do have a sense of “something more.” Mathematicians and physicists tell us of higher dimensions and the possibility of other universes and other modes of existence that stretch our imaginations. Even pre-scientific people had a sense of something greater than they were. We get a vague feeling of that when we look out on the vast ocean, or stare into space through the lens of the Hubble telescope, or peer into the mysteries of life through the microscope. We get a sense of “something” perhaps even “someone” out there greater than we are. But beyond that vague sense, we don’t have much else to work with.

We can become materialists and basically deny this feeling of transcendence as all so much “superstition,” what biologist Richard Dawkins calls the “God Delusion.” In his mind, whenever we find something that amazes us, we have a tendency to call it “god” simply because we don’t understand it. And so from that perspective, we could simply limit

knowledge to what we ourselves can see, touch, or deduce: science, if you will. Or more broadly, Reason. And we can posit that essentially nothing somehow managed to become everything by itself, left to its own natural devices with billions and billion of years to figure it out. And that may be scientifically adequate, at least in biology, but it is still lacking intellectually and spiritually. Is this material world really all that there is?

We could go the route of the “agnostic,” the “we just can’t know” crowd who files these kinds of questions in a big folder labeled “mysteries I’ll never be able to solve so I’m not going to waste time and energy thinking about them” and go back to our wine bar and pour another glass of Chardonnay and discuss politics.

If we go the religious/philosophical route “from below,” we are going to be busy trying to figure out how to poke our heads “up above,” how to rise above our day to day drudgery to stick our heads in the heavenly realms. Buddhism essentially is that. You pursue your chosen path to “enlightenment” which will carry you up out of this mundane existence into the “nirvana” of nothingness. Or you can go the way of the bulk of religions and work your way up some spiritual ladder from sinner to saint, hoping that by your efforts, with or without the “grace of God,” you will eventually get a glimpse of glory and the beatific vision. All well and good, but the progress is usually more in the downward than the upward direction, and eventually you just get tired of climbing and getting nowhere and join the ranks of the religious burnouts.

Nicodemus was a rabbi of Israel, a recognized teacher of authority. He came to Jesus at night, probably because that’s a good time for rabbis to converse privately, after hours, without the disciples hearing. In John’s gospel, “night” is the Christless darkness of unbelief. Judas betrayed Jesus at night. Night is the time “no man can work.” Walking in the night leads one to stumble, because “the light is not in him.”

Nicodemus is groping in the darkness for answers. We don’t know what question he was going to ask. Jesus interrupted his flattery by saying, “Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” So we might presume that Nicodemus was going to ask what so many religious people asked Jesus – “What must I do to see the kingdom of God?” That’s a question “from below.” What must I do? And Jesus answer comes down “from above.” Unless you are born “anothen,” which can mean “again” or “from above” you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.

Nicodemus does what all we “from below” creatures do. He hears the word of Jesus as Law, something he must do. He must be born again. That’s how he hears it. And so he wonders, “How can this be? How can a man be born when he is old? How can a man enter his mother’s womb to be born again? What sort of nonsense is this?” To the unspiritual man, these words are utter nonsense. And even though Nicodemus is terribly religious, he is also unspiritual, with the Spirit, groping in the darkness for answers to questions he doesn’t even know to ask.

That’s us. We’re as much in the dark as Nicodemus. And no amount of religion in the form of “doing” is going to shed any light on things. You must be born anew, from above. You’ve been born once from below, and you didn’t do anything. If anything, you resisted being born with every fiber of your being. And when you were finally born, you screamed at what happened to you.

In the same way, you don’t do anything to be born from above. You can’t do anything. It happens to you, by baptismal water and Spirit. You were born of the flesh, now you must be born of the Spirit. You were born from below, now you must be born from above. Flesh and blood cannot see the kingdom of God. You must be a new creation, the old creation cannot get you there.

Still, Nicodemus doesn’t understand. He doesn’t see that all life came from water and Spirit in the beginning. Or that Israel was born as a nation by water and Spirit in the Sea. Nicodemus is stuck in the darkness of his “from below” perspective, and even though he’s a “teacher of Israel,” a credentialed rabbi, he doesn’t grasp this most fundamental thing – that the kingdom of God is something received from above not earned from below.

And we’re no more enlightened. No one has ascended to heaven to get a peek and come back to tell us about it and point the way. Only One, and He’s the One who descended from heaven to the depths of Death itself, Jesus, the Son of Man. He came down “from above” so that we who are from below might look to Him lifted up on the cross, and like the Israelites in the wilderness, be cured of the snake bite of Sin. This is how God loves the world: He gave His only-begotten Son so that whoever believes Him, that is trusts the promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation by His death and resurrection, will not perish but will have eternal life. God didn’t send His Son to condemn the world, contrary to what you might hear some Christians say. He sent His Son to save the world through Him, and He did, by His dying and rising.

That comes to you by water and Spirit with the Word in your Baptism. How do you know if you are born “from above”? How do you know that you are a child of light, called out of darkness? How do you know that you are born of God? Being “from below,” you can’t know that on your own. You must be told. It must be revealed to you. God must come down to you, you cannot go up to Him. You are darkness, Christ is light. You are from below, He is from above. And He has come down from above to be with us, to be one of us, to be born as we are born, to live as we live, to suffer, bleed, and die as we suffer and die.

“You are baptized!” That’s the Spirit’s from above answer to our from below questions regarding our kingdom status. Will I see the kingdom of God? You are baptized. Will I rise to eternal life on the day of judgment? You are baptized. What about the law that condemns me? You are baptized. What about the devil and my conscience who accuse me and remind me of how great a sinner I actually am? You are baptized.

To be baptized is to be “in Christ,” meaning that the old has gone and the new has already come. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.” It is to be declared legally dead to Sin and alive to God in Christ. And none of this you can know “from below.” You can’t taste it, touch it, see it, feel it. You must hear it. The Word must come down “from above.” The Word must become Flesh and dwell among us. The Word must be lifted up from the earth on the cross so that we might look upon Him in faith and live.

The One who is “from above” came down to us who are “from below” that we might be born “from above” and share in His life, His death, His victory, His glory. This is God’s love for the world. This is God’s love for you.

This is how it looks “from above.”

In the Name of Jesus,

Amen.

SOURCE

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