

SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY OF TRINITY

(Cape Town - 7 June 2009)

Text: Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."³ In reply **Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."** ⁴"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" ⁵Jesus answered, **"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."** ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." ⁹"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹²I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. (John 3:1-15)

There are some very confusing things in this world. For example, Why is that people say they "slept like a baby" when a baby wakes up every three or four hours? Or if olive oil is made from olives, and vegetable oil is made from vegetables, what is baby oil made from? Or did you ever notice when you blow in a dog's face, he gets mad at you. But put him on the back seat of you car and open the window, he sticks his head out and enjoys the breeze?

In our sermon text we have a confused and puzzled man. His name his Nicodemus. He is a Pharisee and at the same time a big shot on the Jewish ruling council. As all Pharisees he was a great man and spend almost every minute of his life doing the right thing. But when he heard the stories circulating about Jesus, he was rather confused. First of all Jesus was a peasant with no esteemed background. But when he went to the Jordan river to be baptised by John the Baptist, himself a very controversial figure, something extraordinary happened. When John saw him arrive he said to the masses: **"Look, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"** (1:29). It was a claim which Nicodemus good easily have ignored. But it didn't stop there. In the days thereafter this man performed signs which even the Pharisees had to take note of. At a wedding in the village of Cana, the wine ran out. And people testified that Jesus turned six large jars filled with water into the greatest wine ever tasted. But what made the Pharisees sit up, was the connotation attached to this miracle. The fruit of the vine was always associated with the coming of the Messiah. And indeed people said "he" (this peasant from Galilee) was the Messiah.

But the puzzle didn't stop there. Jesus seemed to show little respect to the holy laws of Moses and the temple. When he entered the temple for the first time, he literally "threw the toys out of the cot". Money lenders and animals (provided for the daily sacrifices) were chased out of the temple. He made a whip and didn't hold back.

Nicodemus couldn't sleep. He was too confused. Who was this man: a lunatic or a man from God? So one night Nicodemus decided to talk to Jesus himself. He went to him "at night". We are not quite sure why? Maybe it was one of those nights he couldn't sleep. Or maybe he was just worried that his fellow councillors would see him. That would be an embarrassment: Nicodemus, a

renowned Biblical scholar, talking to this illiterate Galilean peasant!

Or maybe this phrase that Nicodemus went “at night” had symbolic value. The evangelist John loved the use of symbols. One of his favourite symbols was a contrast between “darkness” and “light”. Here is Nicodemus, who should be “light”, but he is caught up in darkness. And he approaches the one of whom John himself had testified that **“the true light had entered the world”** (1:9), but **“the world did not recognise him”** (1:10). And we know it applies even today: Jesus is “the light”, but it is a light not seen by many.

What characterises Nicodemus, however, is that he searches for the light. He is not like so many who sense darkness in their own lives, but don’t even look for light.

Nicodemus’ puzzled state is reflected in the rather general statement he makes on finding Jesus. He says to him: **“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”** It is a polite statement, difficult to place. But clearly there is a question behind this statement. The question touches on the core of our humanity. What is man, if he just dies? And if there is life after death, how do I obtain it? Before Jesus came, Nicodemus was cock sure of himself. But suddenly he was rattled, even if ever so slightly: Here was a man who performed miracles which only God could do, but he showed scant respect to many of the laws which he and the other Pharisees so vigorously adhered to.

Nicodemus’ question to Jesus is: Aren’t we showing the way? Isn’t the way to heaven exactly what we do? We worship every week, we tithe, we fast twice a week, and spend hours in prayer. Surely *that* is the way to God! And that is what everybody needs to learn.

But Jesus looks at Nicodemus and says to him: “Sorry, brother, you got it all wrong: ***I tell you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again***” (v.3). In other words: Try as hard as you can, you will not make it. For you to enter the Kingdom of God, something must happen to you - a rebirth. You (as you are) will always fall short of the glory of God.

Let me explain with an illustration: Most of you will have been to the theme park, Ratanga Junction. If you want to go on certain rides, there is a line drawn against the wall to measure the height of the children. You ask your son or your daughter to stand there, as I did with Peter. He is 2cm short. But he desperately wants to go on the ride. I tell him: “Stretch, son”. And he stretches and strains. I tell the conductor: “He is a good boy and he has no fear.” But he cannot go on the ride. He is short. Whether he is 2cm or 10cm too short, makes no difference.

That is Nicodemus’ problem. He is a pious man, better than 95% of all people. But he falls short of the glory of God. For God, *almost* good is not good enough. You need to be holy, *without blemish*, otherwise you don’t make it. If you one day stand before God and say: “I tried. I was better than my neighbour!”, he will say: “I know you tried, but (and that is Jesus’ answer to Nicodemus) ***flesh gives birth to flesh***”. For you to make into the kingdom of God, you need to be reborn!

If Nicodemus was puzzled before, he is really puzzled now. Must he enter his mother’s womb again? “No”, Jesus indicates, “that would just be flesh again. For you to enter the Kingdom of God, you need to be born from above, from the Spirit.”

Jesus’ words echo what God had said many years before through his prophet Ezekial. The people of Israel just couldn’t change. And then God made a promise. He said: ***“I will sprinkle clean water on you... and give you a new heart. I will put my Spirit in you and move you (from the***

inside) to follow my decrees” (cf 36:25-27). We cannot change ourselves. For us to change, God must do it. And he does so through **“water and the Spirit”**. “That is what you need”, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “a rebirth through water and the Spirit”. It is the creation of something brand new.

And guess what? It has happened to you. It happened when your parents brought you here to be baptised. On that day God made everything new through water and the Spirit. But baptism is not an “object”, a certificate I place on my wall! Baptism is the start of a relationship. Baptism is not only an act, but a lifestyle. It is a lifestyle where I go through life knowing: It is not me, it is not my efforts that bring me to God. *I have a redeemer*. He makes me *perfect* in God’s eyes. And he draws me to God all the time.”

But if baptism is the beginning of a relationship, then it is also something I can lose. Fact is, many do. The Spirit of God is pushed aside. Selfish ambitions, greed, independence from God take over. What God promised is never fully realised. Even within the Christian church a people emerge with no passion for God or his decrees. That is when Jesus’ call needs to be repeated: “You need to be born again”. That does not mean, you need to be re-baptised. But it does mean, God needs to change your heart all over again. Something from “above” needs to happen to you. You need to rediscover what happened to you at baptism.

How does being “reborn” express itself? It expresses itself by the “focus”. People that are reborn have a new focus. They focus on Jesus.

That is what we read right at the end of our sermon text. Jesus says to Nicodemus: **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life”** (v.14-15). That is the sign of rebirth. People that have received a new heart from God go through life focused on Jesus and the cross! They declare unashamedly: “There is my salvation! On Him I hope - on Him alone.” And it is reflected in the way they live their lives.

There you have it. Eternal life is not: I am a bit better than my neighbour. Eternal life is not a matter of *more effort* on my side **“Flesh remains flesh”**. Eternal life is accepting the gift of God in Jesus Christ. Born of the water and Spirit means, the channel between me and God is open. Everyday I experience “grace”, and “grace”, and “grace”. And I worship this God gladly - from the inside (not because there is a law).

What has this got to do with Trinity? Well, this is Trinity. This is the work of the triune-God. He created me. When I turned my back on him, he looked for me in Jesus Christ, and paid for every single sin I committed. And through water and the Spirit he says: “You are mine” And he keeps my focus on Christ. Amen.