

“Reborn in the Trinity”  
Trinity Sunday  
The Rev. Patricia Gillespie - June 7, 2009

*Isaiah 6:1-8*

*Psalm 29 or Canticle 2 or 13*

*Romans 8:12-17*

*John 3:1-17*

**“no one can see the kingdom of God  
without being born from above.”**

Or maybe your favorite translation says “born again.”

The Greek word of the original here (anOthen) means both “again” and “from above.”

Either way,

these verses must account for many tears and probably some blood and sweat.

Taken literally they are confusing,

as is pointed out right away by Nicodemus:

**“How can anyone be born after having grown old?  
Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”**

Poor Jesus.

He seems to like speaking with analogy and symbol and people miss the point.

This is the second story in as many chapters where Jesus is misunderstood

when his word is taken at face value.

First that woman at the well, who is thirsting for God, points out that Jesus has no bucket for the well.

And now Nicodemus is ready to try to crawl back inside his mother.

Looks like Jesus had better get himself to a seminar on communication.

But he doesn’t give up on these two questioners – they are serious about issues of faith.

In fact their literalist skepticisms draw from him more theological insight

than those awestruck, nodding and baffled disciples.

It looks like John has an agenda about literalists.

He presents them as almost comic.

“Jesus! How can I get back into the womb to be born again?”

“Jesus! How ya gonna get water without a bucket?”

Jesus, it seems, is not a biblical literalist.

One trouble with taking the Bible literally is that most of us don’t speak the language.

Contrary to popular opinion, Jesus didn’t speak King James English.

We read English.

Jesus’ words were written in Greek

and likely spoken in Aramaic.

A translation of a translation literally cannot be taken literally.  
That far from the original, the words just never mean quite what we think.  
Add to that the chance that Jesus is probably frequently speaking in symbols  
(How else can he call himself a “gate” or Peter a “rock”?)  
and we’re in trouble again.  
And without the original languages we miss the really funny puns.  
(That can be a serious dent in our incarnational theology,  
leaving Jesus with an inhuman lack of any sense of humor.)

At least according to John, taking our bible literally is a problem.  
And yet this scripture is the gift that God has given us.  
Perhaps we trust that the gospel writers, writing Aramaic stories in Greek, are inspired.  
Can we also trust that the same Spirit inspired the translators?  
Maybe even that the same Spirit inspires our communal reading of it?

Where two or three are gathered  
(especially if they are Anglicans)  
there will be disagreement about what scripture means.  
(Just look at our upcoming general convention.)

This is our tradition.  
At least until the last ten or twenty years,  
the majority of Anglicans, including Episcopalians, took scripture “seriously but not literally.”  
The bible IS God’s word.  
AND it is always in need of translation into our words.  
Because our language changes.  
Because the Spirit changes us.  
Because we grow in understanding.  
We can hear new things in old words.  
We can give new words to old truths.

And then along comes something like Isaiah’s vision  
or the Holy Trinity.  
(It is not scriptural, you know. Or at least only marginally so by implication.)  
Along comes fundamental mystery to toss literalism out of the window.  
That, of course, doesn’t stop us from trying to understand -  
We want to know what Isaiah’s awesome vision means for us.  
We want to understand the Trinity:  
three in one and one in three;  
Father, Son, Spirit;  
Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer...  
And we want to know how to respond as faithful Christians.

Even those of us who are not literalists often, like Nicodemus,

want to understand in logical, practical terms.

And we want to do something in response.

Yet sometimes the logical conclusion misses the point entirely.

Once upon time, there was a small jazz club in New Orleans.

In a corner of that club sat an old dilapidated piano.

All of the jazz artists complained about this antiquated instrument.

The piano players dreaded playing on it.

The vocalists dreaded singing with it.

And all of the combos that played the club

wished that they could bring in their own piano--

just like they could a saxophone or a trumpet.

Finally, after years of listening to these jazz musicians complain about his piano,  
the owner of the club decided to do something about it. ...

He had the piano painted.

Like Nicodemus, we're looking for something from Jesus:

to learn, to grow, to figure out what to do next.

When Jesus tells us that we must be born from above,

many of us get excited and decide to do something about it.

Unfortunately, what we've decided to do is to repaint the piano.

(Doesn't matter if your piano is the church, your spiritual life, the liturgy  
or something else in your life that seems not to be working.)

Like Nicodemus,

we know too much and we're too ready to do more.

We want the facts. We want proof.

We want to understand the Holy Trinity.

We want to understand this new birth.

And we want to do something about it.

We live in a world that tells us that seeing is believing and activity is better than waiting.

So even in our faith life instead of listening to the music,

we experiment with different colors for the piano,

and then keep scratching our heads when the sound doesn't change.

Jesus is saying that it's time for something other than simply painting the piano one more time.

Facts and proof, busyness and accomplishment, aren't enough.

So it is with birth -- both the literal, earthly sort and spiritual birth.

The one being born doesn't do the work.

In fact too much 'work' or struggle on the part of the one being born can be a real problem --

trying to go back into the womb is a really bad idea!

It makes the Mother's work much too difficult.

Spiritual rebirth

is not something we do.  
It's something God does to us.

A vision of the Holy One or the concept of the Holy Trinity  
is not something we can comprehend with logic.  
It is God inviting us into relationship.  
We can only stand awestruck and respond,  
“Here am I!” and let God get to work on our new birth.

The Trinity reminds us that the God we worship is all about love and relationship.  
Our highest good is not solitary.  
We reflect God's image not by ourselves but in communion with others.  
Where two or three are gathered, God shows up.

A literalist might say that makes individualism a sin - something opposed to God.  
And yet the reason theologians began to see the truth of the Trinity  
is precisely because in Jesus the one, indivisible God became an individual.  
Jesus was human and so his flesh separated him from other humans.

The doctrine of the Trinity can reconcile the literalist's dilemma between  
John writing “the word [that is God the Son] became flesh”  
and  
Paul writing that we must not live “according to the flesh”?

We, like Jesus, are of the flesh - our skin, our flesh, is the boundary that separates me from you.  
The good news of the Trinity  
is that Jesus united this fleshy, separated life forever with life in the Spirit.  
It is the Spirit that unites us.

And the Spirit, the Gospel reminds us, is like the wind --  
it blows wherever it wants to and we do not understand it.

Spiritual rebirth ... like the wind you're not supposed to understand it.  
Spiritual rebirth ... you're not supposed to control it.  
Just breathe it in.

In our very breath we are reborn and united in the Holy Trinity.  
You needn't understand.  
You needn't paint the piano again.  
Just stand in the presence of God,  
breathe,  
and listen to the music.  
You also must be reborn of the Spirit.