

# ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Trinity Sunday B (30 May 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

*Time-stamp: <2021-05-29 Sat 14:39>*

## **Collect**

Almighty and everlasting God, you have given to us your servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of your divine Majesty to worship the Unity: Keep us steadfast in this faith and worship, and bring us at last to see you in your one and eternal glory, O Father; who with the Son and the Holy Spirit live and reign, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

*Isaiah 6:1-8, Romans 8:12-17, John 3:1-17, Psalm 29*

## **1 Nic at Night**

I love today's Gospel reading from the Gospel of John because Nicodemus is one of the smartest, most honest people in the whole book. Nicodemus is a pharisee, an important religious and political leader of the Jewish people, and probably a wealthy man. He pays a visit to Jesus one evening, and listen to what he says! "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."

Nicodemus gets it. He understands who Jesus is and what Jesus is about. So Jesus right away responds, meeting Nicodemus right at the edge of Nicodemus' capacity to understand, engaging him in a conversation about what it means to be spiritual, born of the spirit, born from above, a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus is great at religion. Jesus invites him to carry that forward into the life of the spirit.

## **2 Spirituality and Religion**

Life in the spirit calls us to a different perspective on life, the universe, and everything. Jesus doesn't call us to be gullible, believing any random thing. Jesus doesn't call us to be other-worldly, disconnected from the cares and concerns of our neighbors. But Jesus' life and words *do* call us to a different way of life.

To be "born of the flesh" means to have our thoughts, opinions, and judgments shaped by our instincts, our fears, our bodily desires. It means to go along with the truths and meanings taught us by the surrounding culture, in the media, by others living as "born of the flesh." It means following the wide road, the easy way, the popular path.

To be "born of the spirit" is to live in a way that takes every thought captive for God. Spirituality is the capacity to encounter God. Spirituality is to notice God, to be aware of God, to pay attention to God. A deep spirituality is one that remembers that God is the one whom we "live and move and have our being": that nowhere and at no time are we apart from God. Spirituality is the practice of staying connected to that reality, living a life shaped by the pervasive presence of God.

Life in the spirit is a common aspiration. Religion, not so much. Religion has gotten a bad reputation for rigidity, navel-gazing, or controlling others. The sexual abuse scandals in the church have been horrifying. To see religion claimed for partisan or tribal purposes, enlisted for “culture wars,” and used to define who is “in” and who is “out,” is a travesty. Is it any wonder people label themselves “spiritual but not religious”? If these things were all I knew of religion, then I wouldn’t want to be a part of it either!

But religion is none of these things! Rather, religion is *training* and *practice* for spirituality. Religion is the tradition we have received from those who have gone before us, the sacred texts and the creeds, the practices and the habits, even the buildings and the governance structures, the ways that people have *spoken* and *acted* that helped them to begin to notice God. The word “religion” is from the latin word *ligare*, a word from which we get the term “ligament,” those structures in our bodies whose purpose it is to connect bone and muscle. *Re-ligion*, religion, helps us to re-connect with the Spirit of God within us. Religion is a body of knowledge and practice, handed down from generation to generation, intended to prepare us, hearts, minds, and bodies for a life of the spirit.

You wouldn’t take work as a doctor or a teacher or an electrician without training! First you would go to school, study, serve an apprenticeship. You don’t have to discover the basics of medicine or pedagogy or electricity by yourself. Instead you can learn, be shaped by, the wisdom of centuries of practice in your discipline of choice, using that *tradition*, with its own vocabulary, perspectives, rules of thumb, and civil codes, as your starting point.

Religion is exactly that tradition of wisdom that prepare us for the practice of spirituality. Whether we gather together to celebrate the Holy Eucharist or pray alone in our closets, religion teaches us how to look for God, how to listen for God, how to notice God’s presence in the world around us. Sure enough, religion is one of the “earthly things” of which Jesus speaks: an earthly thing that points us toward and teaches us to be receptive to that which is heavenly. Religion is important and life-giving for this reason! But it’s crucial that as we engage with religion, we keep our eyes on the goal, which is life in the spirit.

### **3 Not to judge the world but to save**

One of the things I love about the Episcopal Church is that we tend to be pretty clear that we’re in the business of religion. We have creeds and litanies, books and vestments, buildings and furniture, sometimes even smells and bells, all designed to re-connect us to God. We don’t tend to get too uptight about what people believe or even, within reason, how they live. Our conviction is that our prayers embody a way of being that will lead each one of us into life in the Spirit. God’s own presence then will shape *every* aspect of our lives.

At the end of our Gospel reading today, we read *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.*

God is not going to judge you on your religious practice: which church you attend, how you dress, whether you cross yourself or listen to the sermon. God is not going to judge you on whether you believe every word of the creeds or say the daily office or even study your Bible. You sure aren’t going to be judged based on whether you can explain the concept of the Trinity! Instead, all these religious practices and ideas have been handed down to us for the purpose of drawing us into *the life of the Spirit*. In the end, St. Paul tells us, all our religious practices will cease and be left behind. In the end, just as Jesus invites Nicodemus, we will all be spiritual, not religious. **Amen.**