

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC  
TRINITY SUNDAY, JUNE 7, 2009  
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer  
“How Can This Be?”

“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can this(these things) be?’”(John 3:9)

He comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness! His friends and associates have serious questions concerning this new teacher. Nicodemus has questions, too, but he isn't about to let the others, the members of the Sanhedrin, see *him* sitting at the feet of this young upstart! He is, however, much impressed by the “miraculous signs” which are a part of Jesus' ministry. Thus he feels compelled to talk with Jesus, alone and in person. He does not understand how all of this could be.

Nicodemus begins the conversation by affirming that Jesus must be a teacher who has come from God because of all the wonderful things he is doing. But Jesus interrupts him with a whole new thought, pointing out to Nicodemus that what really matters is that a person be born again. When Nicodemus responds with a “Say what?”, Jesus goes on and speaks of the Kingdom of God and adds another new concept, that of the Holy Spirit!

It is all just too much to bear! The poor man has come to Jesus with some honest questions, only to find them being multiplied by this mysterious teacher. Had we been there, we probably could have easily heard the frustration in Nicodemus' voice when he asked, “How can this be?”

Today is the Sunday of the Trinity. We are past Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has arrived and we are ready now for some deep theological stuff, n'est pas? It is the same “stuff” we are asked to consider each year on Trinity Sunday. It is the frustration of Nicodemus all over again. It is the complexity of the whole package - one God, yet three persons. A Creator, who becomes incarnate, dies, comes back to life, disappears, yet continues working in the world as a Spirit. Life used to be so simple. But now, like Nicodemus, we ask “How can this be?”

It is of some comfort to realize that you and I are not the first to question such things. From Nicodemus down to the present, our forerunners in the faith have struggled with these issues, and it was out of the deliberations of the early church thinkers that the doctrine of the Trinity was formed. It was their way of putting into words the mysteries of God which they already believed in their hearts.

What they believed was this. First, there is but *one* God. Like the Hebrews before them, they believed this intensely. There was no room for compromise on this point. One ultimate reality stands behind all creation, and that alone is holy. That alone is worthy of human worship. That alone is God! The classic creed, or confession of faith, that expressed belief in this one God had been used by the Jews for centuries. They got it from Moses as it is recorded in Deut. 6:4, and it is called the “Shema.” “Shema” is a Hebrew word which translates to: “Listen! Now hear this!” The devout Jew was to recite it twice each day, morning and evening, and as an expression of unity whenever a group of Jews gathered for any purpose. It goes like this: *Shema, Israel! Adonai elohano, Adonai ekhud!* “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God; the Lord is one.”

Evidently this confession was and is just as important for the new Israel, the Church, as it was for the old Israel. *Jesus himself made this clear.* Mark tells us in his Gospel of a time when a teacher of the Law came to Jesus and tried to trick him with the question, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: *Shema Israel...*" and he went on to recite the whole thing, but added at the end, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." Thus the Church had a clear word from Jesus: "There is but one God."

Yet the Church also had other words of Jesus, and, after a time, the words of Paul, and then the other writers of the New Testament. These words claimed a divine position and authority for Jesus, the Christ. The Apostles themselves used the new creedal formula when they proclaimed "Jesus is Lord." "Lord" was a common term of the day, and could easily be applied to a famous teacher. But to say that both Jesus *and* Yahweh are LORD *and* GOD; how can this be? Problems enough? Yes, and more, for these early thinkers also remembered the passages of the Old Testament which often spoke of the "Spirit" of God, both in the sense of creation and in the sense of empowerment. Add to all this the teaching of Jesus that the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, etc., would return after he died, rose, and left this earthly life. Was this the old "Spirit" or a new form of the Divine Reality? It was enough to "boggle" the mind of anyone. It was enough to make Nicodemus and others after him ask, "How can this be?"

Thus the stage was set for the formation of the Agios Trias, the doctrine of "The Holy Trinity." The Church struggled, the Councils met, and in the end, this is what they said: First, God is one. Second, God is Father/Creator; Son/Human Being; and Spirit/sustaining power. Third, these three "persons," while they have different functions, are somehow united in one reality. There, it's as simple as that! At the same time, it's as mysterious and profound as that! It's the doctrine of the Trinity!

You see, when the very best theological minds came together and asked the question of Nicodemus, "How can this be?", they soon realized that they were somewhat at a loss to explain God! What they finally did was to preserve the mystery of God, while at the same time affirming the Christian experience of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

At this point, in the silence of your mind, you may be asking, "Yes, but, how can this be?" A fair question, but each of us can only answer it out of our own experiences. I can honestly say that I experience each of the three persons of the Trinity at different times in my life. Other times, they are indistinguishable.

For example, whenever I worship in an Episcopal Church, I am aware of a constant shift back and forth between God as a single reality, and God as three persons. The lessons, the prayers, the hymns, all pay tribute to a triune God, who is also One, and I am somehow uplifted by the sheer mystery of this complexity.

When I am alone, and in meditation, it is the same experience. Usually if I don't understand something, I talk with the authority figure, not necessarily a "father," but certainly the creator and "commander-in-chief." When I first learned of my Leukemia, it was also this person with whom I sometimes got very angry! You might say I always did have an "authority problem!" On the other hand, if I need to do some reflection, or simply "talk out" my concerns as I go along, it is

often the sisterly image that I use. You see, I never had a brother, but my sister and I are quite close, so the experience comes naturally. When I receive “feedback” from these encounters, it always seems to come like “a gentle wind, stirring the leaves of my mind.” I find the “Spirit” of God to be quite subtle, in my experience! In fact, sometimes it’s really hard to hear, or to feel, and it seems like I am simply part of “The One.”

What are your experiences of God? I’ll bet they are as different as the people in this building! But how can this be? Should we not all have the same or similar experiences of the Godhead in order to understand it? And how is it that many people can experience the same event and yet have many different perceptions of it? It is said that *everyone* experiences God at some point in their life, whether they realize it or not. “How can this be?”

Nicodemus didn’t understand it. The Disciples didn’t understand it. The early church thinkers didn’t understand it. You and I don’t understand it. It’s a mystery. But it’s also an experience. It’s an experience that Jesus wanted Nicodemus to understand, or he wouldn’t have tried to explain it to him.

It is all the work of God - one God - made known to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a Holy Trinity, a profound mystery which reflects the Christian’s experience of God. How can this be? Well, like we sometimes have to tell our children when they ask “why” or “how” for the umpteenth time: “I don’t know; it just is!”