

Sunday Homily

TRINITY SUNDAY

30 MAY 2021

YEAR B

“Nicodemus said to Jesus,
‘How can these things be?’”

John 3:9

Illustration

Alice was moving into her very first home, and working to a tight budget. Some things she acquired second-hand, but she had spotted a new wardrobe that was absolutely right for the bedroom. The catalogue picture was beautiful – hanging space, drawers, top cupboard – so she dug into her savings and ordered it.

When the delivery van pulled up, Alice rushed to the door. “One wardrobe to sign for,” said the man, but Alice’s face fell. All she saw being unloaded was a long, thin, flat box. “That’s my wardrobe?” she queried. “Aye, love – flat-packed. Nice and easy to put together, don’t you fret.” And with that he was gone.

Alice opened the box and slid out several flat pieces of wood. “How on earth can that be my lovely wardrobe?” she muttered. “I don’t believe it.”

Gospel Teaching

The picture Alice had seen was of a wardrobe in all its three-dimensional splendour. No wonder she found it difficult to understand how the pile of flat pieces in front of her could ever be much use to her. It would take a lot of imagination, a giant leap of faith, to visualise it. And it probably didn’t help that the instructions seemed to be written in Japanese!

On Trinity Sunday especially, we try to make sense of how different aspects of God fit together, into an image we can use. We find it difficult to comprehend. When Jesus tried to explain the relationship between himself and God and those who were born of the Spirit, Nicodemus echoed something many of us feel about the Trinity: “How can these things be?”

Does reading the Bible’s instructions help us fit the pieces together? Jesus asked Nicodemus: “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” He seems to imply that someone who had studied the history of God’s dealings with his people, someone who worshipped God faithfully and carried out his commandments, should be able to understand. Yet it certainly isn’t easy.

From his knowledge of the scriptures, Nicodemus would know about the Spirit of God having been active in creation. But here was Jesus saying that ordinary people could be born of the Spirit in a new way. Nicodemus saw Jesus as a teacher, and was sure he had come from God, a prophet perhaps. But Jesus stunned him with the announcement that he was God's only Son. Father, Son and Holy Spirit: the three Persons of the Trinity.

But the word "Trinity" doesn't appear in the Bible: it isn't in our instructions. Later centuries of Christians invented the term to describe the idea of the three-dimensional God, the way in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit together show us who God is: not separate flat pieces, but an assembly of love.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. God created the world, created us, and loves us. Father, Son and Spirit are different dimensions of his love: creating us, rescuing us and strengthening us in faith.

Application

Eternal life starts here, if only we suspend our disbelief, allow the Spirit to work in our lives, and accept that Jesus can save us. If only we trust that these things might be, even if we can't quite see how.

Alice needs all parts of her wardrobe: without the sides, the top would fall down. To build these flat pieces into a wardrobe, she needs to have a good translation of the instructions, study them carefully and follow them. The same applies to our faith: a modern Bible translation with the benefit of the latest scholarship (just as Nicodemus had the benefit of Jesus' own teaching, to supplement his knowledge of the scriptures) and some study notes.

Alice will probably call on friends to help: people who have put a wardrobe together before, or are good at visualising possibilities! The same applies to us: members of a study group or friends in the congregation with stories to tell of God's love in their lives.

The wardrobe is for using. The Trinity is not just a theory. In baptism, we are born of the Spirit; as a Christian community, sharing this Holy Communion, we are part of that loving, dynamic relationship, which is the Trinity. Let's not keep God in a box, flat-packed, but share with others the height and depth and breadth of his love.