

"Mysteries of the Faith" John 3:1-17 Holy Trinity 2023

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, There are several deep mysteries in the holy Gospel today.

Christ first of all says, "You must be born again." We hear this phrase so much that we may forget how strange it is. We were born once, but it sounds at first like nonsense to say we must be born again. Nicodemus says so, and he was a man educated in the Word of God. Yet He had not understood this mystery.

Since mankind is conceived and born in sin, as King David attests in Psalm 51, then we need new birth. We need a new heart, as Ezekiel prophesies. The heart of stone with which we were born is hardened by the corruption we inherited from our father Adam. We are consequently born dead in sin.

How can we make ourselves born again? The answer is that we cannot. It is beyond human power and comprehension. Even if we could manage a rebirth somehow, it would still be a birth into sin and death. We need the right kind of birth, of which we are incapable.

But Christ speaks of a mystery. It is a mystery precisely because it is a work of the Most High God. He gives birth through the power of His Word.

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In the beginning, He caused the creation of all life by speaking His Word. At first, the world contained neither death nor sin. But since Adam fell, all creation became infected by corruption.

Yet His Word can create again. His almighty power and grace shatter our hearts of stone. He makes new life inside us, not based on the old corruption. He recreates us in the image of His only-begotten Son, who is the Word by whom all things were made, and in whom alone we find new birth.

Christ describes this new birth by another great mystery, with the words, "by water and the Spirit". The Spirit is of course the Holy Spirit, who comes with the Word to give new birth. Yet He also comes with water in Holy Baptism. Since John had been baptizing for a long time, Nicodemus should have recognized that John's baptism was for repentance into the forgiveness of sins. This is new birth. Although our Baptism, unlike John's, is in the Name of the Triune God, it also gives the same rebirth through repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

How can water do such things? It is not the water by itself that does it. But when the Word of God combines with the water, it is a life-giving washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Ghost, instituted by God. If we claimed such power in water by our own authority, what nonsense that would be! But God has put His promise

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in this Sacrament. Therefore we must not speak ill of this grand mystery in water and the Word.

Many do. Many speak of Holy Baptism as if it is a useless splashing of water. Many say that Baptism cannot save, in spite of Scripture's clear testimony. But they are unknowingly taking the side of the Pharisees, who ignored and rejected Baptism as if it was nothing they needed.

But for us who recognize this mystery as the gracious hand of God, we are blessed immeasurably by this washing. Eternal life in the new birth is ours. Forgiveness of all sins is ours, because we trust that God's promise of water and the Spirit is not in vain.

Christ gives us another mystery in verse thirteen. He says, "No one has ascended into heaven except He who came down from heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven." Now, if you are following along with the Reading, you may notice that some words were left out on our bulletin. The words, "who is in heaven," are omitted by some Greek manuscripts and by some English translations, but not the older ones like the King James version.

It is easy to see why someone might leave out these words. They are so mysterious, they sound preposterous! How can Christ come

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down from heaven, yet remain in heaven? That sounds like a contradiction.

Doctor Luther says: "How is it that He has descended from heaven and is still in heaven? ... He descended into our flesh and blood and humbled Himself below all men, unto death on the cross, as a man forsaken and accursed by God. However, He was not in the meantime separated from God, but He remained with God all the time and hence was always in heaven; He exists from eternity, ever beholding His Father and present with Him, ruling and working together with Him, co-equal in power and might."

As Saint Germanus wrote in the eighth century Christmas hymn, "A Great and Mighty Wonder," "The Word becomes incarnate, And yet remains on high ..."

What a fantastic truth! The Son of God lived among us in the form of a servant. Yet He was not separated from His Father by taking human flesh. Only at the Cross did He cry out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Only there was the communion between the Father and Son broken, in yet another mystery that is beyond us.

In Christ we glimpse the incomprehensible truth of His two natures. He is fully God, yet at the same time fully Man. We cannot completely grasp this, yet we confess that it is true.

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This is our Savior, and no other. If He were merely man, born in sin as we are, He could not have saved us. If He were merely God, He could not be a substitute for us. Only this God Man could pay the redemption price for us.

This points us to perhaps the greatest mystery: That God loved the world in this way, that He gave His only-begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. Even if we skip over the mystery of how God can have a Son, begotten before the creation of the world, we are still left with this grand and wondrous thought: God loved us sinners.

He did not simply love in His heart. His love was shown in His action. He loved by doing. The doing was the giving of His Son, not only into human flesh, but also into death. The doing was the resurrection, implied by the words, "Everlasting life." By rising, He showed that He had conquered death so that we also might live in His never ending life.

We may want to shy away from God's incomprehensible mysteries. Yet in these mysteries is our salvation. If God were as simple as us, then how could He save us? Instead, He is far above us, far wiser and more powerful. His grace defies our puny minds. Just considering

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His willingness to save us wretched sinners at the expense of His Son, boggles our thoughts.

Instead of shying away from these mysteries, let us confess them boldly and gladly, for they reveal the God of our salvation.

In His Name alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.