Sermon for Trinity Sunday Year B

Readings: Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

i

Jesus was crucified sometime between AD29 and AD33 – scholars disagree about the precise year, but there is no doubt about the date of the outbreak of the Jewish – Roman War in AD66.

Between these dates, AD29 and AD66, something very remarkable happened that changed the history of the world. A wandering preacher from an obscure part of Palestine, a young Jewish artisan who never travelled further than a hundred miles in any direction, with no political or religious connections, was proclaimed to be God.

He was not proclaimed to be ‘a god’ in the current fashion among Greeks and Romans who frequently deified their deceased emperor and added him to their ever-growing pantheon of gods, but rather, Jesus was proclaimed to be God by the most fiercely monotheistic nation in the ancient world.

The Jews had defended their monotheistic religion for the previous 2,000 years against the syncretistic influences of Egypt, Philistine, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome – often at a terrible price in blood and suffering. They defended a religion that declared there was only one God who made the whole universe and who was the God of all nations. Their God, Jehovah, was an invisible God and no graven image could be made of him in an age dominated by statues of the gods and of powerful men.

Yet a small group of such believers had started a new religion in which they proclaimed a carpenter’s son from Galilee who had been rejected by his own religious leaders as a blasphemer and crucified under Roman law as a political insurgent to be the physical embodiment of this unique and invisible God.

How could this fantastic development have come about? And why was this new religion seemingly impervious to persecution and even death? And why were so many, including many citizens of Rome across the length and breadth of the empire, joining their ranks?

In AD49 (or possibly as early as AD41), Priscilla and her husband Aquila were expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius (Acts 18:2-3) when Claudius expelled the Jews from the city. They went to Corinth and later accompanied Paul to Ephesus. Yet Priscilla and Aquila were not Jews, they were Christians, but at that stage Roman officialdom could not differentiate between a Jew and a Christian, especially since the majority of Christians at that time were ethnic Jews.

Yet by AD64, when Nero blamed the Christians specifically for the fires in Rome and not the Jews, it is evident the Roman state had learnt who the Christians were and what they believed and knew they were no longer to be identified with the Jewish community. By being differentiated from the Jews the Christians lost the protection the Jews had been accorded by the Roman state to practise their monotheistic religion.

So following the First Jewish-Roman War which raged from AD66-AD70, the Roman state permitted the Christians to re-enter the destroyed city of Jerusalem because the Romans realised the Christians had not participated in the rebellion. The Jews, however, were barred from their holy city and the Jewish leaders had to take up residence in Jamnia. Clearly, the Christians were preaching a faith that was at odds with the Jewish tradition.

One piece of evidence that points us to the fundamental difference between Christianity and Judaism from which it emerged is found in the very earliest fragment of the NT which we possess.

The Three Persons of the Trinity are abbreviated in the text: thus God or *Theos* in Greek becomes “*Ths”*; Jesus or *Iesous* becomes *“Is”* and Lord or *Kurios* becomes “*Ks*” and Holy Spirit or *Pneuma* becomes “*Pa*”.

This habit of abbreviation is adopted by the first Christians from the Jewish practice of showing respect by abbreviating the word God in their manuscripts. Here, we see the Christians applying that very same principle to the names of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Further evidence is found in the Bodleian library fragment from the *Acts of the Apostles*. In this oldest fragment of this NT book, we find that God is also abbreviated, but unusually it is not abbreviated to the traditional “*Ths*” (*Theos*), but to an isosceles triangle with a bar across – thus substituting a familiar Jewish abbreviation with a new triangular symbol depicting the embryonic Trinitarian faith of the new religion.

It is because Christianity is now so familiar to us that we fail to feel the full force of the shock that such new ways of speaking about God would have caused initially within the Jewish community, but later also within the Greco-Roman world.

Such a revolution requires an explanation.

ii

In John 3:1-17 we see a staunch member of the Jewish community, Nicodemus, a member of the ruling Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, embark upon a journey from Judaism to Christianity. What had attracted him?

Well, in John 2:23-25 we read that when Jesus first visited Jerusalem for Passover many of the Jewish leaders believed in him because they witnessed the “signs” Jesus performed. But Jesus will not entrust himself to people who are merely attracted by his power. Jesus demands disciples that understand his mission, rather than who simply want to use his power.

There might have been many easy converts in Jerusalem at the very start of his ministry, who like Nicodemus are immediately attracted by what they see. But in John 2:23-25, Jesus keeps his distance from such fans. He must first teach them the way of the cross. We witness Nicodemus receiving his first instruction in the new faith in today’s passage from John 3.

Nicodemus shows Jesus great respect in addressing him as ‘Rabbi’ – hardly the usual way a member of the Sanhedrin would address a carpenter from Galilee.

Nicodemus deduces that Jesus must be from God if he can perform such signs. Jesus then speaks to him about being “born again”. Or does he?

Nicodemus clearly understands Jesus to have told him that ‘no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again’ (v 3) and replies, ‘How can a man enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born?”

But Jesus had said Nicodemus must be born ‘*anothen*’ which means, ‘from above’ – that is one way of speaking about heaven. Jesus responds to Nicodemus’ misunderstanding by explaining further: “…unless one is born of the water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again/from above/ “*anothen”’.*

Jesus further clarifies that he is talking from personal heavenly experience prior to this earthly encounter: ‘…we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen…I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man.’

We are not told what Nicodemus made of this, but presumably he did grow in faith, for he defended Jesus’ right to a fair trial in John 7:50 and finally showed his new allegiance when he helped Joseph of Arimathea with Jesus’ body after the crucifixion (John 19:39). The leap of faith Nicodemus had to make was that Jesus was a teacher sent by God in the sense in which Jesus claimed special and unique knowledge of heaven and that Jesus conferred such ‘birth from above’ which was the sole means of entering the kingdom of God.

No wonder we read at several points in the NT that many believed but were afraid of the Jews – for their new belief in Jesus was an absolute revolution and understandably seen by many Jews as pure blasphemy.

iii

Paul’s powerful words in Romans 8:12-17 sum up the transformation that is experienced by those who are born of the Spirit, or from Nicodemus’ conversation with Jesus, born ‘from above’:

…those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For…you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.’

It is because men and women all over the Roman world were experiencing such a transformation in their lives through faith in Christ that the whole world was turned upside down. Only a belief that is truly revolutionary in its nature can produce such a revolution in people’s hearts and bend the course of history and continue to change hearts and lives across the globe two thousand years later.

Such a revolutionary faith we see depicted in the curious abbreviations of the earliest fragments of NT parchment which we possess. Such a revolutionary faith we hear Jesus explain to Nicodemus. Such a revolutionary faith we read in Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*. Such a revolutionary faith we celebrate today on Trinity Sunday, for today we celebrate the faith that has transformed the world and is transforming it still.

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