

[A SERMON ON THE TRINITY AND THE NEW BIRTH.]

Sermon for Trinity Sunday; John 3:1-15

A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil, 1522

I. THE HOLY TRINITY.

1. Today we celebrate the festival of the Holy Trinity, to which we must briefly allude, so that we may not celebrate it in vain. It is indeed true that the name "Trinity" is nowhere to be found in the Holy Scriptures, but has been conceived and invented by man. For this reason it sounds somewhat cold and we had better speak of "God" than of the "Trinity."
2. This word signifies that there are three persons in God. It is a heavenly mystery which the world cannot understand. I have often told you that this, as well as every other article of faith, must not be based upon reason or comparisons, but must be understood and established by means of passages from the Scriptures, for God has the only perfect knowledge and knows how to speak concerning himself.
3. The great universities have invented manifold distinctions, dreams and fictions by means of which they would explain the Holy Trinity, and have made fools of themselves. We shall therefore quote only passages from the Scriptures in order to determine and establish the divinity of Christ. In the first place, we quote from the New Testament, where we find many proof texts; for instance, John 1, 1-3: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him; and without him was not anything made that hath been made." Now if he is not made, but is himself the Maker, he must indeed be God. John also says afterwards: "And the Word became flesh."
4. Again, we quote from the Old Testament, where David says, in Ps 110, 1: "Jehovah saith unto my lord, Sit thou at my right hand," that is, sit upon the royal throne and be a lord and king over all creatures, all which must be subject to thee--"until I make thine enemies thy footstool." In Ps 8, 4-8, we read: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him.? For thou hast made him but little lower than God, and crownest him with glory and honour. Thou makest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet: all sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas." That means: Thou hast made him Lord of the whole world. Paul explains this passage, in Eph 1, 20 and Col 2, 9-10, in a masterly way. Now, if God has set him at his right hand and made him lord of all in heaven and on earth, he must indeed be God; for it would not be fitting that he should set him at his right hand and give him as much power over all creatures as he himself possesses, if he were not God. God will not give his glory to another, as he says in Is 48, 11. Thus, we have here two persons, the Father, and the Son to whom the Father has given all that is subject to him. To "sit at the right hand of God" means to be over all God's creatures; he must therefore be God to whom is given all this.
5. God has also commanded us not to worship strange gods. Now, we read in John that, according to the will of God, we should honour the Son even as we honour the Father. These are the words of John 5, 19-23, where Christ says to the Jews: "Verily, Verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father doing: for what things soever he doeth, these the Son also doeth in like manner. For the Father loveth the Son, and showeth him all things that himself doeth: and greater works than these will he show him, that ye may marvel. For as the Father raiseth the dead and giveth them life, even so the Son also

giveth life to whom he will. For neither doth the Father judge any man, but he hath given all judgment unto the Son; that all may honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father that sent him." These are, to my mind, truly clear and distinct words concerning the divinity of Christ. Now, as God commands that we should have only one God, and should not render to any other creature the glory which belongs to God and is due him, and yet he gives this glory to Christ, Christ must indeed be God.

6. Paul says in Rom 1, 2-4: "The Gospel he promised afore through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, who was declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead; even Jesus Christ our Lord." Therefore, according to the flesh he began to exist, but according to the spirit he existed from eternity, although it was not clearly understood before; as it was not necessary that we should make a God of him, but only that we should declare and understand that he is the Son of God. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, as Christ himself says in John 16, 13: "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all the truth." And elsewhere the Evangelist writes, John 17, 1-5: "These things spake Jesus; and lifting up his eyes to heaven, he said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that the Son may glorify thee: even as thou gavest him authority over all flesh, that to all whom thou hast given him, he should give eternal life. And this is life eternal, that they should know thee the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ. I glorified thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which thou hast given me to do. And now, Father. glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was."

7. We also read in Ps 2, 8: "Ask of me, and I will give thee the nations for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession." He is truly enthroned king of all. He is God's child, and the world is subject to no other prince or king. Likewise, in another psalm, David openly calls him God, when he says: "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of equity is the sceptre of thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated wickedness: therefore God, thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows." Ps 45, 6-7. God will make no one such a king who is not God, for he will not give the reins out of his hands; he alone will be the Lord over heaven and earth, death, hell, the devil and all creatures. If he, then, makes Christ Lord of all that is created, Christ must truly be God.

8. We can, therefore, have no surer foundation for our belief in the divinity of Christ than that we enwrap and enclose our hearts in the declarations of the Scriptures. The Scriptures gradually and beautifully lead us to Christ; first revealing him to us as a man, then as the lord of all creatures. and finally as God. Thus we are successfully led to the true knowledge of God. But the philosophers and the wise men of this world would begin at the top and so they have become fools. We must begin at the bottom and gradually advance in knowledge, so that the words of Proverbs 25, 27 may not apply to us: "It is not good to eat much honey; so for men to search out their own glory is grievous."

9. Our faith in these two persons, the Father and the Son, is therefore sufficiently established and confirmed by passages from the Scriptures. But of the Holy Spirit, the third person, we read in Mt 28, 19 that Christ sent forth his disciples, saying to them: "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Here divinity is also ascribed to the Holy Spirit, since I may trust or believe in no one but God. And I must trust only in one who has power over death, hell, the devil and all creatures, whose authority withholds them from harming me, and who can save me. None will suffice except one in whom I may trust absolutely. Now, Christ in this passage commands that we should also believe and trust in the Holy Spirit; therefore he must be God. In the Gospel according to John, Christ speaks frequently to his disciples of the Holy Spirit, his power or existence.

10. In Gen 1, 2 we read: "And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." But this passage is not as clear as the one last quoted; the Jews attack it and affirm that the word "spirit" in Hebrew signifies "wind."

11. David says in Psalm 33, 6: "By the word of Jehovah were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the Spirit of his mouth." Here it is quite clear that the Holy Spirit is God, because the heavens and all their hosts were made by him. And, again, David says in Ps 139, 7-8: "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, thou art there." Now, this cannot be said of any creatures--that it is everywhere and fills the whole world--but only of God, the Creator.

12. Therefore, we cling to the Scriptures, those passages which testify of the Trinity of God, and we say: I know very well that in God there are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; but how they can be one I do not know, neither should I know it. This may suffice for the first part. Now we will come back to the Gospel and say something on that in the time that is left us.

Part II: The Explanation of this Gospel; Christ's Conversation with Nicodemus.

I. The Conversation in General

1. In this Gospel you see clearly what reason and freewill can do. You may see it distinctly in Nicodemus, who was the best of the best, a prince and leader of the Pharisees, and the Pharisees held first place in their day. They were, however, in the highest things--in spiritual life--altogether blind and dead before God, however holy, wise, good and mighty they may have been considered by men. The longer Nicodemus associates with Christ, the less he understands Christ, although he is expected to understand only earthly things and the manner of Christ's death. Reason is so blind that it can neither perceive nor understand the things of God, nor all things which properly belong to its own sphere, This is a blow to nature and human reason, which have been rated so high by philosophy and the wise men of this world; the wise ones have said that reason always strives to attain the best.

2. God has here given us an example showing that even the best in nature must fail. In instances where human nature is at its best it is blind, not to speak of its envy and hatred. Christ has here demonstrated by examples, words and deeds that human reason is altogether blind and dead before God, Hence, it cannot appreciate divine things nor desire them.

3. Now, Nicodemus, who is a pious and well-meaning man, cannot grasp the work and Word of God; how then would Annas and Caiaphas? He comes to the Lord at night, which he did from fear, not desiring to be called a heretic by others. From this we may conclude that he was in nature an old Adam, cowardly seeking Christ by night, and that he did not yet possess the true light. If he had been a "new man," he would have come in the bright light of day, fearing no one. Because of his hypocrisy, the Lord deals sharply with him, cutting off his salutation and all further speech, as we shall see. Nicodemus approaches the Lord with these words: "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God. for no one can do these signs that thou doest, except God be with him."

II. The Conversation In Detail.

4. He thinks that he has uttered these words in all sincerity; but there is still the old life and nothing but hypocrisy. For this reason Christ will not accept his salutation, but will take from Nicodemus everything in which he feels secure and will make a "new" man of him, giving him a new heart and enabling him to walk by faith. He says to him: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

5, Christ's words are as if to say: No, my dear Nicodemus, I am not moved by your beautiful words. You must give up your old life and become a new man. You have not the faith which you say you have; you are still afraid. Although the natural man hears the Word of God, the Gospel, and delights in it, yet it does not

enter the heart. Therefore, we must slay reason and experience the new birth. This is what Christ means when he says that we must be born anew. Reason cannot understand this, wherefore Nicodemus replies: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born?"

6. Thus reason takes offence at the Spirit, imagines unrealities and conceives of this new birth as a natural birth. Therefore Christ proceeds, explaining this birth to him to clear his misunderstanding, and says: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

7. In other words: The new birth of which I speak must be otherwise explained. I do not abolish the natural birth but I speak of a birth which is of water and the Spirit. Then he continues: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is borne of the Spirit is spirit."

8. These words cannot be grasped by reason, which seeks to explain the words "Spirit" and "water," speculating how such birth may be. Here it sees nothing in the nature of a birth and therefore plays the part of a fool by saying: How can a man be born of water and the Spirit? Indeed, such a source would produce but water-bubbles.

9. Now, Christ speaks and destroys reason, saying: "Art thou the teacher of Israel, and understandest not these things?" You should teach others the spiritual birth, that they might become righteous, but you yourself do not understand it. He defeats reason and the whole law and says: My friend, do you not know how these things can be? It is plain to me, as it was also to the prophets, who corroborate my words. Renounce your reason and close your eyes; cling only to my Word and believe it. Again he says: "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born anew. The wind bloweth where it will, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

10. As if to say: You presume to judge spiritual things by your reason, and at the same time you cannot understand the simple things of nature. He calls Nicodemus' attention to the wind. No philosopher or scientist has ever been able to comprehend and describe the nature of the wind--where it has its beginning or where it ends. We cannot see where the wind comes from, or how it blows past us, or how far it goes. Now, if we cannot by our reason fathom those things which we see daily in nature, much less will we be able to fathom with our reason the divine works which God accomplishes within us.

11. How a man is born anew may easily be told in words. When, however, it is a question of experience, as it was here with Nicodemus, then it is a hard matter to understand and it requires effort to attain the experience. It is easy to say: We must blind our reason, disregard our feelings, close our eyes and only cling to the Word--finally die and yet live. But to persevere in this, when it becomes a matter of experience and when we are really tested, requires pains and labour. It is a very bitter experience.

12. An example of this new birth we have in Abraham, whose son was to inherit the world and whose seed was to be like the stars in heaven, as was promised him in Gen 15, 5. Then God came and commanded him to slay his son. Now had Abraham acted as reason dictated, he would have concluded thus: Aye, God has given me this seed, by which he has promised to increase my family, and now he commands me to offer him up as a sacrifice. Surely, God cannot command this; it must be the devil. But Abraham slays reason and honours God, thinking: God is so powerful that he can raise my son from death and increase my family through him. or he can give me another son, or effect his purpose in some other way, which I do not know. So Abraham commends all to God. Here Abraham leaves his old life and surrenders himself to God, believes in him and becomes a new man. Then the angel comes and says to him: "Abraham, Abraham, lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me," Gen 22, 11-12. Abraham could not have imagined that God would thus come to his rescue; nay, he had already in his heart slain his son.

13. Now, the beginning of this birth was in baptism. The water is baptism; the Spirit is that grace which is given to us in baptism. The result of this birth is clearly seen in the hour of death or in times of test by poverty and temptation. He who is born of the flesh fights to defend himself, looks hither and thither, employs his reason to make his living. But he who is born anew reasons thus: I am in God's hands, who has preserved and nourished me before in a wonderful manner; he will also feed and preserve me in the future and save me from all sorrow and misfortune.

14. When we are about to die we feel that we must depart and we know not whither; the house of shelter is not ready and we know not whether it will be a white or a black house. For where there is flesh and blood, there is still the old Adam, who does not know where he shall go, whether below or above, to the left or to the right; on what he should rest his soul and depart. Then there is anxiety and misery in the nature of a real hell; for the torment of hell is nothing but fear, terror, dread and despair. But if I believe in God and am born anew, I close my eyes and do not grope about. I am willing that the condition of the soul be changed entirely, and I think O God, my soul is in thy hands; thou hast preserved it during my life and I have never known where thou hast put it, neither do I wish to know, to which place thou wilt now assign it. I only know that it is in thy hands and thou wilt take care of it. Thus we must abandon the life of the flesh and enter into a new life, being dead to the old. This is a real dying and not merely a painful sensation, like the scratching off of a scab, as the philosophers have said; and they have compared the entering upon the new life with the rinsing of a pot by the cook. There must be a real change and an entire transformation of nature, for the natural state and natural feeling must be completely overthrown.

15. Now, the Lord says here: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." "Flesh" means the whole man, with body and soul, reason and will, who is not yet born of the Spirit. For the soul has entered so deeply into the flesh to guard and protect it from harm that the soul is more flesh than the flesh itself. We see it in death, when the flesh does not willingly give up life because the soul is still present; but as soon as the soul has departed, the body allows itself to be mutilated and permits everything that may be done with it. The Lord our God also alludes to this with these words in Genesis, spoken before the deluge: "My Spirit shall not strive with man for ever, for that he also is flesh." Man does not desire the destruction of the flesh, or, in other words, to die; but this is the will of the Spirit, wherefore he desires that the flesh may soon be destroyed. Thus the nature of the soul must change and it must become an enemy of the body, desiring that the body may die, so that it (the soul) may enter into a new life. That this will be, we are to believe, but not to know how. It is the work of God, and he has not commanded us to fathom it.

16. Thus the Lord would point out with this simile of the wind that the spiritual man is neither here nor there and is not limited to any time or place. He does not put on a hood, neither does he do any of the things that are merely material, for he knows that they will not avail. In brief, no pilgrimage, no fasting, no money given for masses, no good work at all is of any avail; there must be a new life, that is, all our works must perish and come to naught, as has been said. The new life, however, consists not in dependence upon works, but it abides and perseveres in the grace of God, which he gives us through Jesus Christ. If I would then hold my ground, my works and all I have devised must fall to pieces and come to naught. Consequently, there is in the new man no definite beginning nor end. We indeed hear the blowing of the wind, but do not know whence it comes and whither it goes. Thus it is here: A man preaches and the Word is in his mouth, but no one knows whence it comes to him, what it will accomplish and where it will bring forth fruit.

17. Hence, we conclude from this passage that a Christian should not depend upon works, upon certain places or persons. Reason wonders at this and inquires: How can it be that everyone, who is born of the Spirit is to be compared with the wind and that all our works mean nothing? What results can possibly follow? If this were so, all priests, monks and nuns, with their beautiful and worthy lives, must be condemned. Christ answers Nicodemus' question, "How can these things be?" as follows: "Art thou the teacher of Israel, and understandest not these things?"

18. In other words: You surely should know this, because you are one of those who teach the people, but I

see that you know nothing of it. That which I have explained to you, namely, that we must be born anew, you should have taught the people. But you have taught them the contrary--have endeavored to know whence the wind comes and whither it goes, have concerned yourselves about its blowing and other useless things; but the things most necessary to you and the people, you have disregarded. Hear then what I tell you: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and ye receive not our witness."

19. As if Christ said: Should I point out to you how these things can be? It cannot be done. You should believe me, since you say yourself that I am a teacher come from God. When I have said that a man must be born anew and that all your works are worthless, it cannot be demonstrated so that you may see it with your eyes; it can only be explained in words. If you believe it, you will understand it. But Nicodemus did not understand it. Therefore, the Lord, disclosing more and more to him his folly, continues: "If I told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

20. I have only told you of earthly things--how we must all come to naught; that man is dust and must return to dust: how the wind blows--and yet you do not understand it. What would you know if I should tell you much about God? I have spoken to you about insignificant things, and you do not understand them. How would you understand if I told you that our immortal bodies, after death, will shine as bright and clear as the sun? And what if I told you of what comes after death? You would understand this much less. He then explains to Nicodemus a few of these heavenly things and continues: "And no one hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended out of heaven, even the Son of man, who is in heaven."

21. Reason does not understand what this means, for it is a sermon from heaven; as if Christ would say: The Son of man came upon earth and yet remained in heaven. He again ascended into heaven; that is, he became Lord of heaven and earth and all creatures. Know then that I am he who has come down, who even descended into hell, and yet remained in heaven. For when Christ was in death, he lived; when he was considered the most insignificant and despised of men, he was before God regarded as the most worthy of honour, and the greatest. He ascended again into heaven, after he rose from the dead, assumed again all power, and has become lord of all creatures on earth. No one has followed him in this.

22. We are truly also in death, but at the same time we are in heaven like Christ. Sin and death rule within us, but they have not been able to conquer Christ; nay, in his hand and in his power are life and death, as he says in John 10, 17-18: "Therefore doth the Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one taketh it away from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." No one but Christ obtains such power that all things are subject to him. Although before the world he was dead, yet he lived before God, his Father; and although before the world he was in great disgrace and shame, he was yet greatly honoured by God. But all this he did only for our sakes. For in the fall of our first father Adam, we are all fallen. Christ had to atone for this fall by his disgrace, shame, ignominy and death, so that we might again obtain honour and life.

23. Christ rebukes Nicodemus here again, as he had done before when he said: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." He says in effect: You presume to ascend into heaven and to escape from hell, but you will fail. Flesh and blood cannot enter into heaven. Only he ascends into heaven, who has come down from heaven, so that the control of all may be in his hands. He can destroy all that lives, make alive all that is dead and make poor all that is rich. It is then here determined that nothing can enter into heaven that is born of the flesh. But Christ's ascent into heaven, as well as his descent to us, was for our benefit, so that we, who are carnal, might also enter heaven. Yet it is only on the condition that first our mortal body must perish. In short, we cannot effect anything by our own works, for God will save us only through Christ, who alone is the ladder by means of which we ascend into heaven. How this ascent into heaven is granted to us, how it becomes our own.

Christ explains when he says: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth may in him have eternal life."

24. What does Christ mean by this? He means that all who would enter heaven and follow him must become new creatures; he ascended into heaven that we might follow him. The narrative to which Christ refers is written in Num 21. 6-9: "And Jehovah sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, because we have spoken against Jehovah, and against thee; pray unto Jehovah, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. And Jehovah said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a standard: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he seeth it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and set it upon the standard: and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he looked unto the serpent of brass, he lived."

25. Christ uses this Scripture to point to himself; his reference is as if to say: Just as the Jews in the desert, who were bitten by fiery serpents, were saved by looking upon the serpent of brass, which Moses set upon a standard, so it is also with regard to me. None who looks upon me will perish; that is, all those who have an evil conscience, are tormented by sin and death, should believe that I have come down for their sakes and have ascended again. Then neither sin nor death shall harm them; nay, they shall not perish in all eternity. Whoever would enter heaven and be saved, must be saved by this serpent, which is Christ; otherwise he will perish. Thus, this Gospel condemns freewill and everything of human accomplishment and points only to this serpent.

26. The spiritual significance of the narrative in Numbers is this: The serpent, which bit and poisoned the Jews is sin, death and an evil conscience. I know that I must die and that I am under the power of death; I cannot free myself and must remain in this state until a dead serpent is set up for me, one which, because it is not alive, can harm no one, but rather benefit, as did the serpent of Moses. Now, this is Christ. I see him hanging on the cross, not beautiful nor greatly honoured. If his death upon the cross were in fashion to win for him the plaudits of men, the flesh might say that he deserved his honours and his exaltation by his works. But I see him hanging in disgrace on the cross, like a murderer and malefactor; thus, reason must say that he is cursed before God. The Jews believed that this was true and they could only consider him the most cursed of all men before God and the world, for they remembered this passage in the Law of Moses: "He that is hanged is accursed of God." Deut 21, 23.

27. Moses had to set up a serpent of brass, which looked like the fiery serpents, but did not bite or harm any one, nay, it rather saved the people. Thus, Christ also has the form and the appearance of a sinner, but has become my salvation; his death is my life; he atones for my sin and takes away from me the wrath of the Father. The living, fiery serpent is within me, for I am a sinner, but in him is a dead serpent; he was indeed regarded a sinner, but he never committed any sin.

28. If, then, man believes that the death of Christ has taken away his sin, he becomes a new man. The carnal, natural man cannot believe that God will gratuitously take away and forgive us all our sins. Reason argues in this manner: You have sinned, you must also atone for your sin. Then it invents one good work after another and endeavors to take away sin by good works. But the Gospel of Christ is: If you have fallen in sin, another must atone for you, if a man believes this, he becomes one with Christ, and has everything that is Christ's.

29. This Gospel, then, signifies that our works are nothing, and that all human power can do is useless, but faith in Christ does it all.

[TOP](#)