



SUNDAY OF THE

HOLY TRINITY

Study Notes for the Christian Layperson

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Collect of the Day:

Almighty and everlasting God, You have given us grace to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity by the confession of a true faith and to worship the Unity in the power of the Divine Majesty. Keep us steadfast in this faith and defend us from all adversities; for You, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, live and reign, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Introit:

Psalm 8:1-2a, 3-5 (antiphon: Liturgical Text)
— *Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the Undivided Unity*

Psalm:

Psalm 29 (antiphon: v. 2) — *Ascribe to the Lord glory*

Old Testament Reading:

Isaiah 6:1-7 — *Isaiah's vision of the Lord*

Gradual:

Liturgical Text — *Blessed are You, O Lord, who beholds the deep*

Epistle:

Romans 11:33-36 — *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!*

Verse:

Liturgical Text — *Blessed are You, O Lord God of our fathers, and greatly to be praised and glorified forever*

John 3:1-15 ESV

Author and Date:

John the Apostle is the author, and this book is traditionally dated around AD 90. This is an event unique to the Gospel of John, which introduces Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus is a recurring character in John's Gospel, most notably at the scene of the crucifixion (see John 7:50-51 and 19:39-42).

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."

- Theologians are divided on the true nature of Nicodemus' intentions with Jesus. Some suggest Nicodemus is disingenuous in his flattery of Jesus, while others say that Nicodemus approaches Jesus out of a real curiosity about His person and work. I favor the second option, because Nicodemus approaches Jesus under cover of nightfall, as to avoid raising suspicion. This fits into St. John's interplay between light (righteousness) and dark (unrighteousness), as Nicodemus is coming out of the dark into the light. Also, Nicodemus makes positive reference to both Jesus' teaching and His signs, both of which Jesus commends to the Jews in John 10:22-42 as proof of His identity.

³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

- The Greek word that is translated as "again" can also mean "from above." The best way to determine which is the correct translation is by looking at the context. It is clear from verse 4 that Nicodemus takes Jesus to mean "again," but the rest of the dialogue from Jesus indicates that He means "from above."
- The concept of being born from above comes up for the first time in John's Gospel in chapter 1, where St. John writes, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:12-13)

This shows that being born from above is an action that must be taken up by God alone. Because we are children of Adam and conceived and born in sin (Psalm 51:5, for example), we are not Christians simply by being born into a Christian family (blood). We cannot decide to become Christians (flesh). We cannot be converted by another person's desire (man). Only God can cause us to be born from above as His children.

⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

- With these words, "water and the Spirit," Jesus clearly defines what it means to be born from above: Holy Baptism. It is in Baptism that a person is adopted into the family of God (Galatians 3:27-4:7). God is the creator of all mankind, but He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the Baptized faithful. Baptism bestows upon us a heavenly kingdom of righteousness and purity that is founded upon the righteousness and purity of Christ, which He won for us by His perfect obedience to the Father, even to the point of death on a cross.

⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

- Jesus reinforces what was said in John 1. One who is born into this world and has not received Holy Baptism is a son or daughter of Adam, the fallen man. They are bound in slavery to sin and can only produce unrighteous fruit that leads to death. That person who is born from above through the work of the Holy Spirit in Baptism, however, is freed from sin and death to love God and neighbor imperfectly in this life and then perfectly in the life to come (see Luther's *Small Catechism* explanation of the 1st and 2nd Petitions of the Lord's Prayer and Romans 6:4, for example). In Baptism, then, faith begins to produce works pleasing in God's sight. These are not the cause of our justification, but they are certainly a result thereof.

⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

- The word "wind" here is the same word for "spirit." This is another play on words from Jesus, meant to shroud the kingdom of God from Nicodemus until he comes to realize that his own righteousness through the Law is not enough to get him into God's Kingdom.
- The Gospel's movement through the preached Word and the right administration of the Sacraments is a mystery to those on the outside of God's kingdom, because they cannot see (or comprehend it with their fallen reason).

- This also indicates to us that we, who are made members of God's kingdom, can be certain that the Spirit works through certain means. The movement of the Spirit is not mysterious to us, because Jesus has linked it to preaching, baptism, and the Supper.

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

- Jesus is astounded by Nicodemus' lack of understanding. As a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus should have been able to use the writings of Moses and the Prophets to properly understand Jesus. This is why Jesus then points Nicodemus to Genesis and Numbers in the next few verses.

¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

- This is perhaps a reference to Jacob's dream in Genesis 28, which featured a ladder or staircase reaching from earth to heaven and angels ascending and descending it (Genesis 28:10-17). We can identify that ladder or staircase as Jesus Himself, using His word to Nathanael in John 1:51: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." As St. Paul tells us in Ephesians 4, in his preaching on Psalm 68, Jesus is the only one who descends from heaven in order to ascend again.

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

- Jesus uses the text of Numbers 21:4-9 to show us how verse 13 is accomplished and what its end result is: that Jesus is to be lifted up (which is referring to the crucifixion—see John 12:32). This is the logical and theological conclusion to this text on Baptism, because Christian baptism incorporates sinners into the death of Jesus (Romans 6:1-11). It is by our incorporation into Jesus' death that we are set free from sin and death.

- Here is where the connection to Trinity Sunday becomes evident. We are baptized into the triune name of God (Matthew 28:19). God becomes our Father, Christ becomes our Brother, and the Holy Spirit becomes our Comforter.

