

May26th 2024 - Rev Jo Smith

How would you describe a tiger to someone who has never seen one?

You probably wouldn't use this dictionary definition:

"Fierce Asiatic feline mammal,
tawny in colour, with black stripes."

But whatever words you used couldn't fully convey the beauty, power and energy of that magnificent creature.

A photograph taken at a family wedding portrays the people who were there and what they were wearing. What it won't convey are the complex personalities and dynamic relationships, the sense of family history and shared experiences.

There are all kinds of things that we need to experience personally before we can understand what they're like.

If this applies to tigers and families how much more will it be true of anything concerning God and our relationship with him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We can find a definition that tries to explain the Holy Trinity, for example:
"There is one God, eternally existing in three persons: Father, Son (Jesus Christ) and Holy Spirit. The three persons of the Godhead are co-equal and co-eternal."[1]

But words are inadequate. We can't pin down an elusive mystery and restrict it in a lifeless form.

Our understanding of God must be a **lived** understanding and to **live**....we must be born. And that brings us to Nicodemus in today's gospel reading.

Nicodemus has already been born once. Physically, but also, I'd say, spiritually. He has been born into the traditions of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. He has been born into the concerns for holiness and ritual purity of their interpretation of their religious tradition. Jesus

tells him that in order to enter the kingdom of God, he needs to "born from above," or born again. Jesus is speaking metaphorically, but, as so often happens in the Gospel of John, the people to whom he is speaking take him literally.

Nicodemus is quite right to say that a person cannot enter into the mother's womb a second time and be born (v. 4). He himself can't be born again physically any more than anyone can. But a person can be reborn spiritually, or as Jesus puts it "born from above." John's Gospel frequently distinguishes between the "below" and the "above." The "above" is the realm of God working through Jesus to bring light, and to invite belief and sharing in the eternal life in the present. The "below" is the realm of this world, with its darkness and resistance to belief in Jesus.

New birth, then, is a breaking free of unbelief into belief. It is a breaking free of darkness into light. It is a breaking free of restricted, judgmental life into abundant life. As such, spiritual new birth is painful. Like physical birth, it involves leaving behind the past and breaking into the present. Like physical birth, sometimes it takes longer than we would like, and at other times it comes upon us before we are ready. Spiritual new birth, while set in motion by God's Grace, takes labor on our parts. Several times in his conversation with Nicodemus Jesus uses the image of being re-born: "born from above"; "born of water and Spirit". It's as if Jesus is trying to get across how completely different life with God is – so different it's like entering a whole new world.

Being born into a new life might sound scary – a journey into the unknown. Everything will be new and different and we will be totally dependent on the Being who has given us this new birth. Believing that that Being has given new birth out of love for us we can also believe that the family of the Holy Trinity will receive us with joy and delight and a faithfulness on which we can safely depend.

We know that family of the Holy Trinity:

We have and we know the God of Isaiah -
the God who is high and lifted up in his temple

the God who speaks and brings forth all of creation,
the God who is judge, lord, ruler, king -
the God who is in light inaccessible hid from our eyes..

This God is strange to us
this God is beyond us
this God we dare not touch
even though we know this God and he knows us,
even though we see this God's signs all around us in the earth, the wind,
the air, and the fire.

And then we have the God who is in Christ.
the God who is Christ -
the God who is lowly, and humble
the God who reaches out and touches others,
the God who serves others,
the God who walks the earth with us,
and cries and laughs with us;
the God who calls God Abba, Father, Daddy..
the God who is tempted with us
the God who hungers and thirsts with us
the God who embraces us and encourages us
the God who surrenders himself to death for us

And we have and know God the Spirit -
God the bringer of visions and of dreams,
God the source of strength and of hope,
God the supplier of healing words and of comfort filling prayer
God the wind, the breath, the air we breath
God the transformer, the one who gives new birth, new life,
God the presence within us and the presence all around us
God calling to us - calling for us - calling through us,
calling in us..

CS Lewis - in his book Mere Christianity tries to describe part of this
experience - this three-fold knowing - this three-fold loving - in his
description of a Christian at prayer.

"What I mean is this." he writes, "An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get into touch with God. But if he is a Christian he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God so to speak, inside him. But he also knows that all real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God - that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying - the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on - the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. The whole threefold life of the three-personal Being is actually going on in that ordinary act of prayer."

As a Christian I do not know all about God that there is to know -
God is always greater than my knowledge of him -
but I do know what God has shown about himself -
I do know God in three different ways,
I know him in three ways
I experience him in three ways.
I love him in three ways.