

Signs and Symbols; problems with language.

Today on Trinity Sunday, I want to address a very common language problem;

There is the language of signs and there is the language of symbols; The difference being that in the language of signs one word just has one meaning, and in the language of symbols a symbol has quite often lots of meanings.

Let's take the stop sign at the intersection; this sign has one meaning and only one: It means STOP. That is the extend of it. It doesn't mean GO! Or maybe stop; it just means stop. (another is 2)

A symbol on the other hand has multiple meanings: Let's take the cross on the wall: Theses two simple sticks have most likely lots and lots of different meanings;

I personally see in the cross the emptiness, all traces of sadness, of grief, of cruelty pain and suffering, all evil, all that is wrong is gone!

Let's be silent for a minute and please ask yourself what you see in this cross and let me assure you that there is no requirement that you have to believe or see what I am seeing.

So let's be silent and look at it for a minute and see what that does with you and what it might say to you.

(1 minute silence)

I did mean a minute and not a minute and a half or 5 minutes.

We might all agree on a sign – most of the time – but it is almost impossible to get 2 or three people agreeing on a complete meaning for a symbol.

Now this language problem is part of today's Gospel story:

Nicodemus understands rebirth as actually going back into a womb and as a grown man this indeed poses a problem.

Jesus doesn't; and offers him another meaning.

He explains now what he meant with: 'born from above'

He means being reborn by 'water and spirit'.

Jesus replaces one symbolic meaning with another.

What Jesus says here the church tries to acknowledge with the sacrament of baptism. In short a sacrament is an outward sign of invisible grace. The sign is H₂O and the invisible part is Grace.

And this is exactly what a symbol in Greek means: It is a coming together of different meanings.

Today is Trinity Sunday and the Trinity is in my eyes a big language problem. The same issue I think applies to the Nicene Creed.

Let me tell you two little stories about the language problem:

When I was 22 I thought that I didn't know who Christ was; and as it is my habit when I don't know something I ask God.

One day – I was working on a palliative care unit in a nursing home – I had to take care of an elderly person. I was a nurse at the time and my duties included the washing and feeding of this patient and also changing dressings. I felt a lot for this person lying helpless in bed unable to speak or move. I was deeply saddened, looking at the frail body.

Suddenly I remembered a saying from Jesus:

“What you are doing for the least among you, you are doing for me”.

Now this moment became indeed life changing for me. – and it still contains for me the first time I got a glimpse into Christ.

When I look at this from a sign point of view; I have to say that everyone has to work from now on in a palliative care unit to find Christ.

When I look at this more as a symbol, I can say that we can find Christ everywhere, because everywhere is a least, everywhere is someone lost.

Another story is about God the father as one person of the trinity.

If I look at this as a sign I personally am having a big problem, because lately God seems to treat me more like a mother would treat her child.

If God the father is a symbol than there is most certainly enough space in this to include the mother, to include the creator, to include the one who just loves us.

If I insist on God the father being a sign; I limit God! I am also cruel, ignoring the pain many people feel with their father.

God is always more. God can not be confined by language!

When I say father: I speak to the one who loves me so much.

The creator, the redeemer and the sustainer, sometimes father, sometimes mother, sometimes parent and sometimes just Love.

God didn't send Christ to condemn us but to heal us, to save us.