

The Unexpected Christ

In the 1500's, the Jesuits decided that Japan would be a good place to bring Christianity.

Unfortunately, the kind of Christianity in full bloom in those days was a highly westernized, politically powerful, triumphal Christianity.

And while they converted people in Japan, after a while, the Shoguns of Japan became concerned about this western influence.

Perhaps they feared what happened to the Africans when the missionaries appeared on their shores.

The missionaries had the Bible while the Africans had the land.

The missionaries said: "close your eyes and pray."

When eyes were opened again, the Africans had the Bible, and the missionaries had the land.

And so, the Shoguns of Japan were quite insistent that people who had converted renounce their faith.

In order to demonstrate that renunciation, they had to step on a bronze likeness of Christ.

Some of the missionaries were jailed and tortured in order to convince them to do the same.

Word got back to Portugal that one of the first missionaries, Fr. Ferreira, had done exactly that.

He had renounced the faith.

His former student, Fr. Rodrigues, could hardly believe it.

Rodrigues left for Japan in search of his mentor.

And when he found him, the mentor confirmed that yes, it's true.

The younger man is astounded by this betrayal, until, in short order, he too is arrested and jailed.

In order to convince him to also reject Christ, many Japanese Christians are tortured within his hearing.

Night and day he hears their cries and moans.

He prays to God for guidance.

Should he renounce?

Should he remain steadfast while so many around him die?

His prayers are met with only silence.

At long last, he can no longer bear the cries of those who are suffering.

He calls the jailer, and renounces his faith.

As he lifts his trembling foot to place it upon the bronze likeness of Christ, the image begins to speak:

“Trample!

Trample!

I more than anyone know the pain in your foot.

Trample!

It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world.

It was to share human pain that I carried my cross.'

The priest places his foot upon the image.

Dawn breaks.

And in the distance, a cock crows." S. Endo, Silence, modified.

Why tell you this story on a day when the gospel lesson is the seemingly strange encounter between Jesus and Nathaniel?

When the gospel lesson seems to draw on memories of Jacob's ladder, the tree of life in the garden of Eden, and our first parents?

Well, let's explore!

At first glance, today's gospel seems like a strange tale of insults and magical knowledge.

Insults like: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Magical knowledge as in Jesus knowing all about Nathaniel - yet never having met him before.

At first blush, this is a gospel lesson that either leaves us scratching our heads or figuring there's really not much here.

Just a cute story about Jesus gathering his motley crew together.

But as with just about everything else in John's gospel, if we slow down, and linger for awhile, there is wonder and wisdom lying right before our eyes.

If only we have the eyes to see.

Let's start with the insult:

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Which, when you think about it, sort of sums up all of Scripture.

Can anything good come out of the Jews?

This hardheaded group of ungrateful nitwits who spend 40 years wandering the desert – until they finally learn enough about trust to get the key to the promised land?

Can anything good come out of the conniving, inheritance stealing, manipulative Jacob, whose 12 sons become the 12 tribes of Israel?

Who falls asleep one night and dreams of a ladder connecting heaven and earth?

Can anything good come out of this prostitute, that tax collector, this self-absorbed celebrity, or Trump??

Yet what we discover along this path of faith is that God is the God of the despised.

The outcast.

Those we dismiss as the least, the lost and the left behind.

While our human society is enraptured with power and glory and swelling music, God is constantly coaxing us to discover her in the midst of grief and loss – even in the midst of the politics of disruption.

These are the places that allow us to stumble upon our true selves.

Selves made in the image and likeness of God.

“Can anything good come out of...?”

Yes.

With God, the answer is always, yes.

And what about this seemingly magical ability of Jesus to know Nathaniel – a fellow who appears only twice in John’s gospel?

“Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit,” Jesus announces, saying it, you gotta believe, with a big grin on his face!

What’s Jesus getting at?

To understand that, we need to understand something about ourselves, namely this:

What is your deepest truth?

What do you know about yourself?

Your character?

The basic core truth of who you are?

Jesus knows what it is, because that's what true love is all about!

True love only comes from one who knows us in our depths.

Who sees and welcomes and embraces our true self.

Which is how God knows us.

Which is why, when we are given the gift of true love, we are free to be who we truly are, because this love makes it safe to walk in that vulnerable place.

And Nathaniel, when confronted with true love, is overwhelmed.

Is that why he gushes out: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God!?"

Because what do you say when true love grabs you?

You explode with joy!

In the encounter with true love, we come close to what the mystics call "thin places."

Where the veil between heaven and earth becomes sheer, like gauze.

So that paradise can almost be touched.

Paradise isn't only waiting for us after we close our eyes for the last time.

We can glimpse paradise here, now, as followers of Christ.

Like Jacob, like Nathaniel, we too can peek into heaven's gate.

We too can stand in breathless wonder — as angels ascend and descend upon the Son of Man.

The story about Nathaniel takes us back to the beginning.

Back to the garden of Eden.

There, our first parents, having tasted of the knowledge of good and evil, are sent packing so they don't eat from the tree of life.

Here, Jesus is the tree of life!

And Nathaniel is invited to taste.

To come and see.

Our first parents wove aprons of fig leaves, hiding in their shame.

Nathaniel stands under a fig tree, as Jesus invites him to follow.

In weakness and vulnerability, in pain and loss, the gates of paradise open once again — in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

That's what's unfolding in this strange gospel lesson this morning.

Maybe Nathaniel thought he was signing up for riches and power.

But what he comes to see is that God operates under the radar; with humility, patience and humor.

And so paradise happens whenever we discover the true nature of God.

One who asks of us complete and total trust.

A God who is found among the thorns, in the midst of human pain, despair and bewilderment.

And I wonder, if those first missionaries to Japan had understood our faith in this way, whether they may have encountered the Japanese people in a very different way.

Rather than seeking to impose western triumphalism on them, might they have sat with the people, seeking to discover the God already moving among them?

Might they have discovered in the wisdom of Buddhism and Shintoism, God already revealing God's self to them?

And in offering up a suffering Jesus, one familiar with the hardship and pain that invades every human life, might they have found a different reception?

And I wonder this too:

In their renunciation, did they discover the unexpected Christ?

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