

The Gate to Paradise

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

Insults as in: can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Magical knowledge as in Jesus somehow knowing all about Nathaniel without ever having met him before.

So at first blush this can be the kind of gospel lesson that either leaves us scratching our heads or just breezing through it, thinking there's really not much there; maybe just a cute story about Jesus gathering his motley crew together.

But as with just about everything in St John's gospel, if we take the time to slow down, to linger for a while and look deeply, why, there are pieces of wonder and wisdom laying 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 have to 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, master manipulator named 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 or that tax collector or from this self-satisfied businessman?

Can anything good come out of Trump????

And what we discover as we walk along this path of faith is that time after time, despite all the odds, despite what we see as unavoidable and unmitigated disaster, God makes a way where there is no way.

And, paradoxically, it is only when we allow ourselves to go to those desolate places, places that seem to be endless vistas of no way out – whether from grief or loss or the current politics of disruption – that it is in those very places where we are most likely to stumble upon our true selves – this self that is 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, who’s entirely absent from the other three gospels, and who basically disappears from the story after today?

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

What is Jesus actually saying to Nathaniel?

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 **the** core truth about Nathaniel, and he knows **the core truth** about you too.

After all, isn't that what true love is all about?

We experience true love with the one who knows us to our depths, who knows us at a glance, who sees and welcomes and embraces our true self.

This is how God knows us.

It's in our psalm today...

"O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit and when I rise;
you discern my thoughts from afar.

You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely."

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, just like you and me, when confronted with true love, this love that knows him inside and out, he is, like us, overwhelmed by the beauty of it all.

Maybe that's why it gushes out of him: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God!

You are the King of Israel!"

Because what do you say when true love grabs you, heart and soul?

Why, you explode with joy!

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

Thin places, where the veil between heaven and earth loses its usual thickness, so that paradise can almost be touched.

This paradise isn't something that awaits us only after we close our eyes for the last time.

It's the paradise we can experience here, now, today, as faithful followers of Christ.

Just as Jacob in his dream, just as Jesus promises Nathaniel, we too are given the chance to see the heavens opened, to stand in breathless awe as we too watch angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

As the great author observed, "We do not understand that life is paradise, it's enough to wish to understand it, and at once paradise will appear in front of us in all its beauty." F. Dostoevsky.

As Merton reminds us, "Paradise is not 'heaven.'

Paradise is ... a place on earth.

Paradise belongs more ... to the present than to the future life; [yet] in some sense it belongs to both." Merton, *New Directions*.

Paradise is where we recover our lost innocence, our lost purity, our willingness to let go of trying to control people, places and things, to finally and at long last place complete and total trust in God, a trust which was shattered by our knowledge of good and evil; a knowledge our first parents indulged in, a knowledge we continue to worship, even though it causes nothing but dissension. Id., paraphrased.

This trust doesn't come easily, because most of us are so wrapped up in our need to be in control, so focused on our fears and anxieties, that we miss the invitation of this gentle savior to simply "come and see."

But if we respond, what is it that we shall see?

It is this.

That "[a]t the center of our being is a point of pure nothingness, which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a ... spark which belongs entirely to God.

It is never at our disposal or subject to our control.

It is inaccessible to our fantasies and to our brutalities.

This little point of nothingness, this little point of what can only be described as absolute poverty, is in fact the pure glory of God within each and every human being.

It is ... God's name written within us, despite (or because?) of our poverty, our indigence, our dependence as sons and daughters of God.

This spark is more pure than a pure diamond, blazing with the inaccessible light of heaven.

This spark is within everyone, (yes everyone, even that bum on the street, even your obnoxious brother-in-law, even most members of congress!) and if we could see that spark within every human person, why, we would see billions of points of light, coming together like a blazing sun — a light that, in an instant, makes all the darkness and cruelty and hopelessness and fear and shame and confusion of life — vanish, completely...!

There is no program, no step by step directions, for this seeing.

It is a gift.

But I can tell you this with every fiber of my being, the gate of heaven — is everywhere." Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty ByStander*, 142, paraphrased.

Perhaps today's gospel lesson is inviting us to slow down for a little while, to pay close attention to the life that surrounds us; so that in quietness and perhaps even solitude, we too might come and see and

taste and feel the overwhelming love that God pours out into each and every human heart.

Perhaps like Nathaniel, we too can feel grasped by the God who knows us through and through, "the person that each one is in God's eyes." Id., 156.

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