

*St. Nathanael the mystic: Being known and knowing*

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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*The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.' John 1:43-51*

Some of you will recall a recent healing mass at which I shared in full a poem titled *Music*, by Anne Porter.<sup>1</sup> At one point she asks:

<i>Why is it that music</i>	<i>And shining at the heart of it</i>
<i>At its most beautiful</i>	<i>Is the longed-for beauty</i>
<i>Opens a wound in us ...</i>	<i>Of the One who waits for us ...</i>
<i>Deep as a homesickness</i>	
<i>For some far-off</i>	
<i>And half-forgotten country ....</i>	

Both the question and the vision here are those of a mystic – one who imagines and seeks union with God, one whose path to God may be found as much or more by music, or by fasting and prayer more than through intellectual understanding or orthodox doctrine.

Christians of a mystical leaning are often particularly drawn to the Gospel of John, and with good reason. It is where a learned man named Nicodemus hears from Jesus that he must be “*born from above.*” (3:3) Much later, on the night before he died for us, our Lord invites his first followers, and us, saying, “*Abide in me, as I abide in you.*” (15:4a) This invitation complements the Prolog to the gospel, where Jesus is the “*Word made flesh*” (1:14) and the “*light that shines in the darkness.*” (1:5) He is “*... close to the Father’s heart,*” (1:18) and he gives us “*power to become children of God ...*” (1:13)

This background prepares us to join the encounter in today’s gospel between Jesus and a man named Nathanael, whose mystical inclinations may be partly suggested by the fig tree under which Jesus first saw him. Fig trees in the Bible are nearly always a symbolic bellwether. When thriving and fruitful, they signify prosperity and righteousness. When withered and barren, the fig tree signifies adversity and iniquity.

What Nathanael was doing, or not, under the fig tree may also be enlightening. We wouldn’t have heard what he was doing, or not, in our English translation because of a missing Greek verb, *όντα* (*όντα*): *being*. Nathanael is not praying, debating, ministering to the poor or evangelizing. As Jesus first saw him, Nathanael is under a fig tree, and he is *being*.

From this Greek word comes the English *ontology*, the branch of philosophy that contemplates the most elusive questions of existence. It may seem far-fetched to imagine the author actually means anything here by *being*. But why not, when already in this first chapter of the gospel, we have been invited to reconsider *word*, *light*, and *children*?

Before Jesus had seen him *being* under the fig tree, Jesus startles Nathanael by proclaiming that he is “*an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!*” Nathanael responds to this acclaim with a question “*Where did you come to know me?*” The question elicits the fig tree answer from Jesus, a literal answer. But the question could also be seen as more deeply probing, and rhetorical.

In fact, the same question has been asked of Jesus, rhetorically, by many a Christian mystic through the ages: “*Where did you come to know me?*” Seen this way, it becomes a confession of one who has been truly seen and known, reminiscent of Psalm 139: “*LORD, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You trace my journeys and my resting-places and are acquainted with all my ways.*” (1-3)

This is only the first of many instances of Christ’s similarly *knowing* in the Gospel of John. His encounters with different souls in different circumstances cumulatively invite us to see that each of us is also fully known by him. Along the same lines, a reciprocity of knowing may have been anticipated in the verse that begins, “*When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him ...*” Is the author merely telling us that Nathanael was walking toward Jesus? Or could it also be describing a new movement of the Holy Spirit in Nathanael: “*... Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him ...*”

My look at the mystical features in this text arises in part from my own native mystical curiosity, but also for the benefit of any who may be similarly wired and curious. Those drawn to what we call mysticism are sometimes shamed, and may sometimes feel confused or lonely, even, or especially in, the church.

Sometimes even those who think of themselves as less imaginative and more cerebral are caught by surprise. Many years ago, a faithful parishioner and church treasurer named Bill Cutlip was visibly shaken at the door of the church after the service. Bill was an insurance actuarial and a professional trial witness – someone devoted to cold, hard facts. But on this particular day, in his words, he had seen the Holy Spirit enter my body at the altar and flow through my hands at what is called the *epiclesis*: “*We pray you, gracious God, to send your Holy Spirit upon these gifts that they may be the Sacrament of the Body of Christ and his Blood of the new Covenant.*” (BCP, p. 369)

I wish I could tell you that I felt what Bill saw. For better or worse: no. I partly tell you the story, however, in hopes that all of us may always keep some spare room in our knowing of God and in our life together in the Church for the mystical moment, whether sought or unexpected.

The stories of both Nathanael and Bill also remind us that any genuine Christian mystical experience is, in the end, about Christ and not about us. What Bill saw in the mass certainly caught his attention and strengthened his faith. But it did so by drawing him closer and deeper into the mystery of being known by Christ and abiding in him.

Nathanael’s encounter with Christ leads to a confession of faith, and here he becomes twice blessed, first for recognizing that he is known by Christ, and then, through his confession, knowing Jesus as the Christ of God. Jesus responds with a prophecy: “*You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.*” This is the image with which Chapter 1 and the introduction of Jesus in John’s gospel ends. It provides both a framework and a standard for weighing any mystical experiences of our own. The genuine Christian mystic rightly tells of divine encounters only with final reference to God’s revelation of the Christ in Jesus.

My focus on the mystical here may seem perversely divorced from so many troubles in our world now: swirling around us, consuming so much of our attention and stirring up so much justifiable fear about what may happen next. And where, also, in any of this might we hear the voice and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday was Friday, whose legacy and witness will be observed in our nation tomorrow? His messages of racial reconciliation and peace with justice seem as or more relevant and urgent than ever.

But what if the example of the mystic is also more relevant and urgent than ever now? As we contemplate all that now troubles us, we may benefit from noting how the mystic does not begin with the problems of the world and then wonder how to invoke God for solutions, revenge or miracles. The mystic begins under the fig tree, as it were, a place of grounding from which one may contemplate and draw near to the eternal *One who waits for us*, in the words of the Anne Porter poem. The One who waits for us came to us in the flesh but also forever transcends the intractable sorrows and failures of the world.

We need the mystic, to draw us near to Jesus in such a way that we, with Nathanael, ask in wonder, '*Where did you come to know me?*' We need the mystic, to help us see and take heart from the angels that now continue, and forever will continue, to ascend and descend on the Son of Man. *Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> from *Living Things*, Zoland Books, 2006