

Sermon for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany

'Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?"'

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Our Gospel reading for today is indeed very strange, even nonsensical, if we do not examine it closely, with eyes and ears open to the whisperings of the Word of God.

Our Lord glimpses Nathanael coming toward Him, and cries out from a distance, *'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit.'* This is odd enough, especially for Nathanael, who asks the same question we would all ask if a complete stranger started yelling at us in riddles. *'How do you know who I am?'*

It is not Our Lord's way to speak plainly. In fact, Christ Himself admits that He preaches in such a way that *by hearing we shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing we shall see, and shall not perceive.*

So He responds in such a way that, indeed, *seeing, we shall see, and shall not perceive.* *'When you were under the fig tree, I saw you.'* This may seem straightforward enough, except for one problem. At no point is it mentioned that Nathanael was under any fig tree.

Now we may just easily assume that, though St. John does not mention Nathanael sitting anywhere, we can just say that such a fig tree is somehow implied as being around there, and that Nathanael can be implied to have been under it. But this, we should not assume, lest we lose utterly what our Lord is revealing to us in this reading.

For behold, Nathanael himself does not believe that Jesus saw him under any given fig tree, or else he would have simply responded, *'Oh, I see, you saw me when I was over there.'* Nor would that even make sense, because why would Our Lord call Nathanael *an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit,* if his sole

knowledge of the man was that he has a propensity to sit under fruit bearing plants, as I am sure many others did; [as even Sir Isaac Newton did.]

There is more going on here, and even Nathanael knows this, for he responds to our Lord's odd retort about sitting under a fig tree with what seems the most tortured logical deduction ever made in the history of human cognition. Upon hearing about himself sitting under the tree, he calls out to Christ, '*Rabbi! You are the Son of God, the King of Israel!*'

[Now if any here present can deduce from the phrase '*I saw you under the fig tree*' this Jesus character is both God and King, then I will personally pay for your bust to be carved in marble and placed in the Sainte Chappelle in Paris, France. For you would be the greatest of theologians.]

So how can Nathanael make such a leap?

In order to understand this, one must first understand something about apples.

In any good medieval painting of the Garden of Eden, we plainly see a few elements. There is a man, there is a woman, there is a serpent, and there is a tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, a tree bearing apples, almost always with Eve's delicate fingers softly caressing it. I have been asked many times before, 'why is it always an apple?'

The most common and likely answer has to do with etymologies, something in which I am fond to indulge. The Latin word for 'apple' is *malum*. The Latin word for 'evil' also happens to be *malum*. So, since it was the tree of the knowledge of *malum*, evil, it must have born *malum*, apples.

Yet this was not always so. In older times, the Tree of Knowledge was depicted as a different kind of tree, one much more in keeping with the original Hebrew. It was a fig tree. And this seems to make more sense, for it explains why, when Adam and Eve's eyes were open, and they saw that they were naked, they immediately made for themselves clothes of *fig leaves*. They simply used what was nearby.

For this reason, the fig tree was associated with fallen humanity, with sin, and with the curse of the Fall. For this reason, another very strange story about Christ is also explained, the story of Christ cursing and wilting the fig tree as He

travelled for *not bearing fruit, but having only leaves*. In killing the fig tree that bore no fruit, Christ displays that He is destroying that source of our original sin, which though giving us knowledge of good and evil, yet did not advance us, but corrupted us.

Yet what is the connection of Nathanael? Christ calls him *an Israelite, in whom there is no deceit*. This is only said of one other person in the Bible, Jacob, whose name would become Israel after wrestling with the angel. Jacob, who would become Israel, saw God and lived. Now a son of Israel, would see God in the flesh, and yet live.

Indeed, Nathanael was under the fig tree, that of the fall, that of sin, or our father's original iniquity. He saw that Christ saw through Him, into His heart, to see that He was a sinner, but not because of any prescribed doctrine, but because *only God knows the hearts of men*.

Jesus answered Nathanael, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe?"

Now Nathanael, who is the descendent of Jacob, recalled a vision his ancient father once had: *'And Jacob dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.'*

For this reason, Nathanael knew that this Jesus who stood before him was the God of all creation; because of the title, and because of the fig tree.

The Lord acknowledges Nathanael's conclusion: *'You will see greater things than these.'*

For behold, even as his father Jacob saw *the angels of God ascending and descending upon a ladder set up on the earth, that reached to heaven*. So too would Nathanael see a *greater thing*, *'you will see the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'*

Indeed, the Son of Man shall bind together heaven and earth, and by the sacrifice of His body, shall the *dwelling place of God be with man*, and will we be taken up at His appearing upon the clouds, into the heavens. For the ladder Jacob saw, and

the body of the Son that Nathanael was promised was nothing but the cross, the very tree of life, which does away with the cursed tree of good and evil, and away with the shadow of all who dwell beneath its leaves, which bear no fruit.

Soon and very soon, dear Christian, you too will see the Son of Man, making the earth His footstool, and stretching into the heavens. Upon this ladder will angels guide you into the presence of the ever blessed Trinity, [even as they accompanied the incarnate Word down into this world to minister in the wilderness to Him who has come to bring us redemption. And] anew you will say quietly in your inner being what these simple disciples first cried out in the exuberance of their tongues:

“I have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-20, 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51.