

Calling the Earth to Witness

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1 Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-18; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

Wandering around the National Gallery yesterday, I came across a Buddha figure of the Shan people of Myanmar called “Calling the earth to witness.” An evocative phrase that lingers on the palate of the mind like a fine malt whisky — slightly intoxicating and slightly mysterious. The figure was equally evocative, a palpably peaceful seated figure with one upturned hand holding a not visible object of contemplation. I rarely have a title for a sermon, but it seemed fitting to name this one “Calling the Earth to Witness.” Please note the double meaning!

The internet’s latest revelation to me is that today is Martin Luther King Jr day. So besides the third Sunday of the Epiphany and all that entails, we also remember 23 August 1963 when Mr King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington and stirred the crowd with his massive rhetoric. [The full speech is at <http://www.mecca.org/~crights/dream.html>]

Remarking to his audience that some of them were veterans of creative suffering, Martin Luther King declaimed, “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal.’”

A couple of years ago Gore Vidal recalled that another great American, Benjamin Franklin, remarked that the fledging constitution would fail because of the essential corruption of the people.

Martin Luther Jr was fighting just such corruption, the sort that emerges when too much power is garnered into the hands of too few people. One of the by products of such corruption, which in turn becomes one of the tools of such corruption, is that people are not treated as people but as things — to be bought and sold, injured without remorse, mentally scarred, discarded — all in a naked abuse of power.

Martin Luther King Jr had a dream that such things would cease to be, that the people he represented would not only be born equal but would live in a truly egalitarian society.

May we turn now to another, older society, amongst whom there was a dreamer with a similar vision. When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” (Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.)

This was a tribute that any reasonably devout Israelite would recognise as an echo of the Psalmist’s words, “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.” (Psalm 32:2) Nathanael seemed to be taken by surprise by this swift personal assessment of him. “Where did you get to know me?” he asked. Jesus responded “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” At one level, this seems a somewhat whimsical conversation, and I am almost persuaded that the gospel writer is teasing us a bit; or even that Jesus was teasing Nathanael.

Nevertheless, for the Jewish people of the times, the fig tree always stood for peace. Their idea of peace was when a person could be undisturbed under his or her own vine and his or her own fig tree. The fig was a great tree under which to sit and meditate upon life and the universe.

A man without guile — seemingly as transparent as an open window on a summer’s day. Nowadays we might call him naïve, or innocent, or simple - and we might miss the depths of the person that Jesus perceived. It no longer seems to be kosher to just sit under a tree like

Ferdinand the Bull, and contemplate the flowers. Definitely not the economic rationalist thing to do. What a pity that Mr Howard and a few others do not sit under a fig tree and reflect upon the true nature of peace.

What was it that caused Nathanael to exclaim “Rabbi, you are the Son of God!”? I wonder if it was because Nathanael felt recognised. He has asked, “Where did you get to know me?” and, as we are all aware, the word to know in the Hebrew world implied a quality of intimacy beyond that of our normal social commerce. Today’s psalm gives eloquent expression to an intimacy of knowing that is beyond our comprehension; and yet, is believable — the kind of knowing for which we all yearn, even if we do not admit such.

Nathanael feels as if Jesus truly knows him; and yet there is no sense of intrusion or violation. The feeling sense is of falling in love. A sense of welcome and value, warm and safe. It is actually a feeling that we all need in order to develop and survive, both as children and as adults.

So one might remark that Nathanael was not meditating on peace or whatever under the fig tree. Maybe he was a little isolated, hanging back, observing — the way people do at gatherings when they are not quite sure if they will be included. And maybe he feels known for the first time in his life. Perhaps he feels whole for the first time in his life.

I am reminded of the Zen koan to do with the sound of one hand clapping. The origins of that saying are to be found in an ancient Chinese proverb — *gu zhang nan ming* — which translates as it takes two hands to clap, or, clapping with one hand produces no sound. According to Adeline Yen Mah, it is the equivalent of the western saying it takes two to tango or one cannot negotiate by oneself.

What, you may be asking, has this to do with Nathanael? Adeline Yen Mah received a letter following the publication of her book “Falling Leaves,” in which the correspondent wrote:

Remember that no matter how hard you do it, *gu zhang nan ming* (clapping with one hand produces no sound). For a relationship to exist between two parties, both have to participate. Many fail to understand this fundamental fact.

Wise words. Another way of looking at this idea of relationship is that you and I do not have a relationship if only I recognise you, or only you recognise me, but only if we engage in mutual recognition. I know you and you know me.

The dynamic between Nathanael and Jesus involved a moment of mutual recognition, of deep knowledge, in which Jesus recognised a man of no guile, and was in turn recognised as a man with no guile. Here was a deep resonance, and an illuminating occasion for them both. There were two hands clapping at that particular moment, and a relationship was forged. And that’s a good reason to think that you should talk back to preachers!

The same principle of relationship applies to the relationship between a government and the people. As Paul says: “All things are lawful for me”, but not all things are beneficial. (1Cor6:12) The Chinese philosopher Han Feizi was a passionate advocate of the rule of law, but he made one fatal mistake. Although he taught that the law must be constant and obeyed by everyone, he did not include the supreme ruler in his considerations. And thus his rule of law became, in Yen Mah’s words, a “deeply flawed rule of the emperor.” The welfare of the ruler would always take precedence over the welfare of the people. In Han Feizi’s time, adopting this flawed rule of law led to a hideous demonstration of the old adage that absolute power corrupts absolutely. In Chinese history, the same process was played out in the reign of Chairman Mao Tse Tung. There was only one hand clapping.

I am riveted by the expression, a “deeply flawed rule of the emperor.” The parallels with some of the power mongers of western democracy are inescapable. For emperor, read prime minister, or president. Benjamin Franklin’s warning takes on a face as we observe the seemingly unopposed dismantling of basic human rights in the United States, Britain and Australia.

So in this interesting vignette about Nathanael we find a principle of relationship that is crucial to the healthy growth of both individuals and nations. *Gu zhang nan ming* — For a relationship to exist between two parties, both have to participate. Mr Howard take note. My translation of *gu zhang nan ming* is — listen carefully to what the other is saying, and know what is in their hearts.

This was the consummate skill displayed by Jesus of Nazareth, who knew Nathanael when he saw him under the fig tree.

The calling of Nathanael can be taken, of course, at several levels. I have offered one possible interpretation of the story which, I hope may preserve the fathomless mystery of epiphany. The mystery for me is not so much in Jesus’ perception of Nathanael. If Jesus was indeed truly human, then he was no more or less a magician than you or I. Equally well the mystery does not reside in discovery that prompted Nathanael to exclaim “You are the Son of God!” The mystery lies in the deeper intersubjective process, the feather touch of our ineffable God.

Two hands clapping do indeed make a great sound. Try it sometime with a friend. The hi-five is alive and well.

Alternatively, like Nathanael, you could try sitting under a fig tree. God will, inevitably, happen by; and you, equally inevitably, will be taken by surprise.

In the name of God. Amen.