

## Can Anything Good Come Out of Nazareth?

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus begins calling his disciples together. He invites Philip, a former disciple of John the Baptist, to follow him to Galilee. Philip finds his friend Nathanael to tell him the wonderful news that Messiah has finally arrived in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael retorts, "can anything good come out of Nazareth?" It's hardly the response we might expect from someone who thinks he's about to meet the savior of his people.

John's Gospel doesn't describe Nathanael's tone of voice, so perhaps I'm being too hard on him. Maybe he's asking a sincere question, hoping that Philip is right and that the prophecies of the warrior king who will deliver Israel from her Roman overlords have finally been fulfilled. Maybe, but I'm skeptical. Nathanael's words sound pretty dismissive to me.

Philip and Nathanael were both small-town boys. Philip, along with Andrew and Peter, was born in Bethsaida, the fishing village where Jesus walked on the water and fed five thousand of his fans. Nathanael came from Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine. Neither town was a metropolis, but they probably both seemed pretty cosmopolitan compared to Nazareth. Tradition tells us that Biblical Nazareth was an insignificant hamlet, home to fewer than three hundred farmers and tradesmen. Recent archeological discoveries suggest that Nazareth may have been bigger than tradition tells us. Still, it's hard to miss the scorn in Nathanael's comment. It sounds as though that self-satisfied young man is sneering down his nose at the unwashed rabble from an impoverished backwater. And that, my dear friends, is the ugly voice of privilege speaking.

We in modern America are just beginning to grapple with the implications of privilege. As anthropologist Justin D. Garcia explains, privilege "refers to certain social advantages, benefits, or degrees of prestige and respect that an individual has by virtue of belonging to certain social identity groups. Within American and other Western societies, these privileged

social identities—of people who have historically occupied positions of dominance over others—include whites, males, heterosexuals, Christians, and the wealthy, among others.”

Privilege is a function of hierarchy, reflecting the relative value society assigns to its members.

While individual experience varies, the more preferred traits a person has, the more privilege that person typically enjoys. People being people, the more privilege an individual enjoys, the more that individual may be tempted to look down on others who have less.

The amount of privilege that people have is often based on personal characteristics that they can't do much about. Race, sex, gender identity, appearance, ability, and family of origin, for example, can be all but impossible to change. Traits like religious affiliation, education, or career choice may be easier to alter, but that doesn't mean we should have to change them just to get by. Privilege doesn't guarantee a charmed life – just ask Prince Harry. Privilege doesn't mean you didn't have to work hard to get wherever you are. Privilege just allows you to start out with advantages that others don't have. To use what I profoundly hope is a nonpolitical example, let's talk about handedness. Right-handed people are the majority, and the world is organized accordingly. As a lefty, I've spent my life wrestling with can openers and vegetable peelers, turning scissors upside down, and scrubbing ink off my writing hand. The difficulties are manageable, and no one has accused me of being possessed by a demon ... recently. Over the years, though, I've encountered more than one right-handed person who smugly implied that being left-handed made me inferior. In my ears, that smug conceit rings pretty loudly from Nathanael's assertion – he only frames it as a question – that nothing good could possibly come from Nazareth. It sounds as if Nathanael is awfully sure of himself. If so, is he ever wrong.

Neither Philip nor Jesus rebukes Nathanael. Philip, already imitating Jesus, simply says, “come and see.” Jesus simply lets himself be seen. Jesus is right that envisioning Nathanael

under a fig tree before their meeting is a pretty modest miracle. So, Nathanael's gushing response of "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" seems a little over the top.

Perhaps Nathanael realizes that, if Jesus could see him under the fig tree, he probably could also hear what Nathanael said about him. People will say far worse, of course, and Jesus undoubtedly knows that. But it must mortify Nathanael to realize how badly his sense of privilege misled him. Had he been a little more modest, he might have spared himself considerable embarrassment when finally meeting Jesus, who is everything Philip promised and more.

That's one of the pitfalls that accompany privilege. It can trick us into believing that we're better than the people around us. It can make us feel entitled to whatever extra goodies the world showers upon us because we happen to fit a particular stereotype of what society says we should be. Privilege can make us touchy and defensive, because our better angels know full well that every last one of us is a precious child of God living in a body that is a temple to the Holy Spirit, no matter what it looks like, how old it is, or how well it works, so every last one of us has an equal right to enjoy the gifts of God's world. Privilege can make us reluctant to look at ourselves, or to challenge societal norms that make life harder than it should be for people who don't deserve to be disadvantaged. And privilege can make us insist that the brave, noble souls who put themselves at risk to confront injustice aren't really asking us to surrender our own privilege, tear down the hierarchies that divide us, and build a society where everyone can thrive.

This weekend, we celebrate the life and accomplishments of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King was a powerful preacher and civil rights advocate. He did a lot of superb writing and delivered a lot of unforgettable speeches, of which his "I Have a Dream" speech is perhaps the most renowned. It breaks my heart that people who benefit from racism have taken to trotting out that speech to argue that all Dr. King wanted a colorblind society where people would be judged

by the content of their character, not the color of their skin. Yes, Dr. King wanted that. But he also wanted Black Americans to have freedom, reparations, guaranteed income, and an end to police brutality. He called out white moderates who “prefer[] a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice,” along with white churches who, “in the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon [Black people] ... stand on the sidelines and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities.” Dr. King didn’t want America to maintain the *status quo* while pretending to offer a level playing field. He wanted substantive change that would create genuine, lasting justice. Those of us who benefit from white privilege have no business pretending that Dr. King called for anything less.

Scripture affirms that I’ll meet Jesus someday, same as Nathanael did, and he won’t just have spotted me under a tree someplace. Like the Samaritan woman at the well, I’ll be able to tell everyone that Jesus knows everything I ever did. It’s scary to contemplate, but I trust him to be kind. After all, Jesus made Nathanael a disciple despite his condescension, perhaps because there was no deceit in him. It seems that our Lord especially appreciates honesty. So, if we his faithful people want to please Jesus, perhaps we can begin by honestly admitting that Dr. King gave his life so that Black Americans could finally get real justice, not just a semblance of equality. We can confess that white Americans haven’t done much to dismantle the social systems that unfairly privilege us. We can tell him that we haven’t tried hard enough to see the face of God reflected in each other, and we haven’t loved our Black neighbors as ourselves. If we do, perhaps Jesus will give us grace to repent of all that we have left undone and help us finally get to work. It’s been sixty years since Dr. King told America that he had a dream. It’s long past time all of us got together to make that dream come true. *Amen.*