

**Bruton Parish Church**  
**Second Sunday after The Epiphany**  
**January 15, 2012**  
**The Reverend Charles A. Robinson**

Blessed be the Name of God†

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael’s response of surprise and wonder upon hearing about Jesus is based on his preconception that Nazareth is not a worthy place and that Nazarenes are not worthy people. Actually, all indications are that all of Galilee was generally a disdained locale, a place of political unrest, and a generally disreputable location. Of course, Nathanael was a citizen of Galilee himself. His contempt may have been one of self-loathing and inferiority. Of all the places in this reviled place, surely Nazareth is the worst. “I might be nothing but a lowly Galilean, but at least I am not from Nazareth,” he might be saying. What are the odds that God would send an anointed and chosen one to this unlikely place and in such an unlikely kind of human?

Jesus offers personal insight to Nathanael and thereby wins him over, but assures him that he will see much greater things. Jesus says (paraphrasing), “This is indeed true, your eyes and your ears will be opened to heaven<sup>1</sup> and messengers from God will ascend and descend upon the offspring of humanity.”<sup>2</sup> The ancient heresies that humanity and divinity are inexorably separated and completely incongruent were dismissed long ago, but they have reemerged throughout history and continue to invade our world today.

In many popular Christian messages, that which is related to humanity is offered in a negative connotation. The word humanism is generally presented in contradistinction and as an opposing force to the message of Christ. Coupled with the modifier, “secular,” it is the clear and present danger to Christian thought, the distinct antagonist to right living.

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<sup>1</sup> 2183 ἀνοίγω fut. ἀνοίξω; 1aor. ἀνέωξα, ἤνοιξα, and ἠνέωξα; second perfect ἠνέωγα; pf. pass. ἀνέωγμα and ἠνέωγμα; 1aor. pass. ἀνεώχθη, ἠνοίχθη, and ἠνεώχθη; 2aor. pass. ἠνοίγη; 1fut. pass. ἀνοιχθήσομαι; 2fut. pass. ἀνοιγήσομαι; (1) transitively *open* (AC 12.14); *give entrance or access to* (MT 25.11); idiomatically ἀνοίγειν τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς *literally open the eyes, i.e. cause to see* (MT 9.30); with a figurative sense, *literally open the eyes of the mind, i.e. cause to understand* (AC 26.18); ἀνοίγειν τὸ στόμα *literally open the mouth, i.e. begin to speak* (MT 5.2); ἀνοίγειν θύραν *literally open a door, i.e. make possible* (CO 4.3); αἱ ἄκοαὶ ἀνοίγουσιν *literally the ears open, i.e. become able to hear* (MK 7.35); (2) intransitively (second perfect) idiomatically τὸ στόμα ἀνοίγειν πρὸς *literally open the mouth toward, i.e. speak the whole truth* (2C 6.11)

<sup>2</sup> [UBS] ἄνθρωπος, ου m man, human being, person, one (friend, sir, man in address); pl. people; mankind, humanity (κατὰ ἄ. according to human standards); husband (Mt 19.10); son (Mt 10.35); servant (Lk 12.36)

**It is true, of course, that any message which suggests that humanity can and will solve all problems in the absence of and without the need for God is not compatible with the message of Christ. But, neither is it consistent with the teachings of Jesus to deny an active role for humanity in carrying out the realization of the kingdom that he taught. We are the “hands, feet, and eyes of Christ in this world.”<sup>3</sup>**

**Flannery O’Connor never reached her fortieth birthday, but she was at the height of her creative power. Now nearly fifty years after her death, she is recognized in the company of Faulkner, Percy, and Williams - a group of profound and prolific Southern Twentieth Century American writers that addressed the complex and disturbing pictures of our lives clearly and frankly.**

**O’Connor was a passionate commentator on the idea that Humanism and the Christian narrative were not incompatible, but inseparable. She railed against the ancient and constantly reemerging heretical idea that God is distant and removed from humanity and lies in wait to destroy them for failure, as opposed to a nurturing and caring God who goes so far as to become fully human and to make humanity the vehicle of salvation.**

**She is unwavering in her proclamation of an orthodox faith in Christ that is incarnational and a creation that is sacramental.<sup>4</sup>**

**In one of her final stories, “Parker’s Back,” O’Connor presents these conflicting and contrasting images of God metaphorically in the characters of O. E. Parker and his wife, Sarah Ruth.**

**In the story, Obadiah Elihue Parker, O. E., is twenty-eight years old and just married to the daughter of a fundamentalist preacher. Her understanding of God is limited to the written word and she finds no place for God in the physical creation or in humans.**

**O. E. has been unknowingly searching for God since he was fourteen and encountered a tattooed man at a fair. O. E. is so intrigued by the event that he begins to search for beauty, for harmony, for the mark of God by systematically tattooing himself. His attempts do not bring him the satisfaction and balance that he seeks. After he marries Sarah Ruth, she is displeased with everything he says and does, and he desires to please her. He believes that if he can acquire the right tattoo, she will be pleased and will approve of him.**

**After O. E. crashes his tractor into a tree and sets it on fire, he receives a revelation that convinces him that if he takes the very image of God upon himself, his wife will be pleased and will accept him. He finds a compelling picture of Christ that he has tattooed to himself. After this when O. E. repeats his own name, which means**

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<sup>3</sup> Teresa of Avila.

<sup>4</sup> Guroian, Vigen. *The Tattooed Christ: “Parker’s Back” and the Christian Humanism of Flannery O’Connor.*

“servant of God; God is he,” O’Connor writes that he feels “the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts.” He returns home, and shows the image to his wife, but she cannot understand and proclaims, “God don’t look like that!” She drives him from the house, thrashing him with a broom. He leans against a tree and cries. The story ends.<sup>5</sup>

O’Connor desires to show that wearing the image and name of God within the human self and carrying it forward and acting upon it is transformative and is better than an easy religion of dogmatic answers and seemingly impressive insights.

Tomorrow is the Monday holiday commemoration of the life of The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King but today is his actual birthday. In his book, *Strength to Love*, he wrote these words,

“I am convinced of the reality of a personal God...God has been profoundly real to me in recent years. In the midst of outer dangers, I have felt an inner calm. In the midst of lonely days and dreary nights I have heard an inner voice saying, ‘Lo, I will be with you.’” When the chains of fear and the manacles of frustration have all but stymied my efforts, I have felt the power of God transforming the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope. I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose, and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship...in the truest sense of the word, God is a living God.”<sup>6</sup>

Christ is the light of the world. God’s people shine with the radiance of Christ’s glory in the Word and Sacraments. We know, we worship, we obey God through Christ to the ends of the earth.

Blessed be the name of The Living God†

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<sup>5</sup> O’Connor, Flannery, *The Complete Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971. 510-530.

<sup>6</sup> King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Strength of Love*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981. 153.