

Dante has a special place in hell for the deceitful or intellectually dishonest – though he seems to have a special place in hell for everyone - and among these was, and perhaps is, Guido da Montefeltro who was asked by Pope Boniface VIII for advice on attacking the Colonna clan of Rome who had retreated to their fortress at Palestrina. Guido hesitates but is persuaded by the Pope's promise of immunity from damnation because he after all holds the keys of heaven and hell – you'll not be surprised to hear that he too ends up in hell with quite a few other popes, priests and religious. This is to say that judgement matters; both the judgement that we have to make of what the Lord is asking of us in the here and now and the judgement that the Lord makes of us in what we visualise as a Second Coming but is also in a sense in the here and now; perhaps indeed they are the same. Be careful what you wish for. The first reading highlights this need for integrity both in the sense of being honest and moral and in the sense of being whole or united and undivided. No deceit but what you see is what you get – like Nathaniel, without guile:

‘In those days and at that time I will make a virtuous branch grow for David
 who shall practise honesty and integrity in the land.
 In those days Judah shall be saved and
 Israel shall dwell in confidence.
 And this is the name the city will be called;
 The Lord-our-integrity’

When we practise these virtues we are in effect practising Christ and allowing Christ to practise in us – so it's not about being perfect already but on becoming perfect by staying on the way of perfection – that is on the road to completion in Christ. And this mixture that we are on the way means that it can be the least of us who display such integrity, or rather the least expected, and I have in mind a wonderful story of the painter Stanley Spencer – deeply wounded by the experience of the First World War - who was part of a cultural delegation to China in 1954, told here in the words of Helen McDonald:

‘Towards the end of the tour, Zhou en Lai, the Chinese premier, gave a long speech about how much Chinese people loved China and then asked for a response. It was a politically perilous moment. No-one knew what to say. “There was a silence”, the cultural historian Patrick Wright ... told me, “And then Spencer got up, much to everyone's horror and said: “The Chinese are a home-loving people, well so are the English. Have you heard about, have you ever heard of Cookham? Have you ever been to Cookham?”’ (p114 Vesper Flights)

These wonderfully naïve words broke the ice, did the trick, ensured an animated and friendly discussion because what Spencer was after, and went on to say, was that it's this love of the particular which binds us to every other human being:

“I feel at home in China,” Spencer said “because I feel that Cookham is somewhere near”.

Can anything good come from Nazareth, one might hear there. Or China?
 Well, yes, it can.

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