

Protagonist Corner

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The great festivals of the Christian year are times for preachers to enlarge our own perception of the Truth which we are called to proclaim. One of the aids to assist us in meeting this challenge is the work of modern fiction writers. Flannery O'Connor is one such author. In her short story, "Revelation," she introduces us to Mrs. Turpin.

Mrs. Turpin could not see the woman's feet. She was not white-trash, just common. Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well. There was a colored dentist in town who had two red Lincolns and a swimming pool and a farm with registered white-face cattle on it. Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven.¹

Mrs. Turpin's effort to classify people and thereby separate the good from the bad is representative of the effort each of us makes to decipher the complexities of life and thereby make sense out of creation. Because our efforts are no more successful than Mrs. Turpin's, we too become frustrated and dream of cramming the whole mess called "life" into a box car and sending it off.

This failure to understand human relationships and our disappointment over the apparent confusion of the created order bring us directly to the significance of Easter. For Easter, like Christmas, is a time in the life of the Christian community when we celebrate the revelation which gives meaning to life. Yet the revelation is often hidden by the celebration. The spirit of joy, coupled with the pagentry of music, beautiful flowers, and large crowds obscures the meaning of Easter; we tend to become so caught up in the celebration that we forget the revelation which gave birth to the festival.

Christianity is not based on the feelings of majesty created by a sunrise service or of excitement induced by a religious extravaganza complete with massive displays of Easter lilies and glorious music. Neither is our faith built

upon timeless truths such as the Ten Commandments or the historical records of the Resurrection. Christianity is built upon revelation. That is, as Christians we believe we cannot discover on our own the truth about the universe; it has to be revealed to us. It has to come from beyond us and be made intelligible to us. However, the more intelligent we are as individuals and the more advanced we become as a society, the greater is our tendency to become like Mrs. Turpin. But like Mrs. Turpin, no matter how great our wisdom or how vast our experience—no matter how good our blood—we cannot make sense out of the complexities of life and we end up with all the events of history “moiling and roiling” around in our head.

Revelation, then, means we look beyond ourselves to a power greater than we, for the meaning of life. For Christians, the two great festivals of faith are celebrations of the Revelation which comes from God in Jesus Christ. Christmas, with its message of the incarnation, not only tells of a God who is with his people, but also reveals a God who can and will limit himself that we might know him more completely. And Easter, with its focus on the resurrection, not only tells of God's power to defeat death, but also reveals God's ability to transform the crucified Jesus and the defeated disciples, giving them new life and new purpose. We cannot force God to come into our world or into our lives; God chooses to come to us. We cannot take human beings who appear to be useless and give them new meaning and purpose, but God can. God chooses to come to us and God can transform us. These two truths are revealed to us in Jesus and they become the essence of our faith. Neither truth can be discovered on our own.

Easter, then, is a time to celebrate the Revelation of the solution to the confusing complexities of life. Out of this revelation comes a new way of seeing ourselves and of seeing all creation.

O'Conner makes the truth of Easter known as she closes her story by telling of Mrs. Turpin's “revelation”:

A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile.

At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the

invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.²

When Easter becomes our vision of the transforming power of God, we, like Mrs. Turpin, discover the ability of God to take our world, filled with "battalions of freaks and lunatics," and turn us into citizens of his kingdom. And it is this same revelation which shows us a God who can take those of us who are filled with pride over having been given "a little bit of everything and the God-given wit to use it . . ." and burn away our virtues, transforming us into his servants.

When this revelation becomes our bright vision, we too can shout hallelujah.

¹ Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation," *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York, 1965), p. 217.

² *Ibid.*, p. 238.