

Sunday Homily

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

19 SEPTEMBER 2021

YEAR B

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name
welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes
not me but the one who sent me.”

Mark 9:37

Illustration

One of the many things which has changed dramatically over the centuries is the way in which we treat our children. It is a popular misconception that children have always been treated as separate entities within the family or community, or that a period of infancy is followed by a childhood without any responsibility leading to carefree youth and a rebellious adolescence easing them into adulthood.

But this does not accord with history. Children have usually been valued as extensions of the family, ensuring the continuation of the family line, more especially in the case of a son.

But as with some cultures today, children in first-century Palestine had no economic or social status. Though loved and cherished by their extended families, they had no special treatment partly because so many of them died in infancy. They became a viable part of the household when they could begin working, tending flocks, fetching water etc. Their education, usually only for boys, entailed becoming a good Jew, learning the Torah, the Jewish Law. Girls assisted their mothers in learning the skills they would need in running a household. Not for these children the toys, fashions and accessories which are designed for children today. Children were at the very bottom of the pecking order, occupying a minor area of activity with no voice.

Gospel Teaching

The disciples were assailed by confusion and misunderstanding, seeming unable to grasp their role within their own group, let alone in the wider community. They were concerned with questions of status and role because much of what Jesus taught confused the accepted social and religious rules of the day, as well as turning the (then) class system on its head.

For example, rich people were understood to be not just lucky or clever, but especially blessed by God, richly rewarded for their “good” life. But Jesus taught that God loves everyone equally, even the poverty-stricken and sinners.

The disciples ached to discover where they fitted into it all. In using a little child to illustrate his point about his disciples' service to the community, Jesus was choosing a stratum of society which had no voice, no influence, no material wealth, no power: the littlest people in all respects. But this is not sentimentality. To be his disciple, then and now, means serving the needs of those who have nothing to give back, for which there is likely to be no reward, except from the "one who sent me".

Jesus also makes another point. Elsewhere he refers to his disciples as "little ones" and "my children". He is not being patronising but not only describing the fact of their innocence of life's potential but showing them clearly how, in choosing them, God has already chosen the humblest: these are the ones whom God will uplift to greater things, beyond their imagining. But still the message remains the same. Even while being exalted by their new learning, experiences and miracle-working, they not only remain the "children" whose simplicity is so pleasing to God, but they must continue to serve the humblest, among themselves and in the wider world. Because this is Jesus' model for the new Church: being, and serving, the humblest.

Application

Being childlike is different from being childish. Children accept God easily and trustingly. God our parent longs to teach us what we need to be happy, to become fulfilled and authentic human beings. But children are also Jesus' metaphor for those whom society regards as at the "bottom of the heap": asylum seekers (whether economic migrants or not), drug addicts, people who sleep rough, who sell sex, etc.

As our society becomes richer, more and more weak, vulnerable or demanding groups are relegated to the back of our minds. But just as we have a duty to our children, so, Jesus tells us, do we have a duty towards the less fragrant members of society. He gives us no escape from his example. He consorted with outcasts just as despised as our list. His clarity of vision of the kingdom remained constant in its simplicity, his trust in his Father was absolute. Jesus modelled childlike love and uncritical service. Children are integral to the present and future Church, but then so are we and so is everyone we meet, however demanding or smelly.