

Wednesday Reflection by David Kennedy

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" ²He called a child, whom he put among them, ³and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. ⁶"If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. ⁷Woe to the world because of things that cause sin!^[b] Such things are bound to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!⁸ "If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin,^[d] tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire. ¹⁰ "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. ¹²What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of your^[g] Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. *Matthew 18. 1-14*

The designation 'little ones' appears in all three Gospels. At first glance we may think that Jesus is referring simply to children. But not so; it appears rather that he used the words 'little ones' as a description of his disciples

In Matthew 18 Jesus asks a question 'Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?' And here Jesus does place a child among them and says to the adults present that unless they turn and become like children, they will never enter the Kingdom. To be a disciple of Jesus is to become 'a little one'; it is to deny self and status. But he goes on to talk of such 'little ones' as having guardian angels in heaven, and being like sheep – if one of them strays, the Father seeks them until he finds them, for 'it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.' This passage carries a dire warning of placing a stumbling block before any of these 'little ones'.

The image of the 'little ones' shows Jesus' pastoral care for all his disciples, but especially for those who outwardly might seem insignificant. It seems that Jesus especially prized those who exhibited that simple trust in him, a quiet and steadfast faith, that child-like humility in living obedient and godly lives. This is the type of quality that Jesus sets out in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 – the blessedness of those who are poor in spirit, whose hearts are pure, who are meek, and who hunger and thirst for righteousness – to see right prevail. Of course, sometimes, even the foremost of Jesus' disciples failed to live out these truths – the apostles were concerned who among them was the greatest, who might have the best seats in the Kingdom, who would be 'first'. Jesus turns this on its head. He points rather to the youngest, the weakest, the most humble.

Why did Jesus give such attention to the 'little ones'? One important reason is that Jesus challenged the social mores of his day. In New Testament days, men had all the power and ruled the roost. Yet Jesus gave dignity to those who were considered as far less important than men – Jesus honoured, for example, women and children. Moreover, he challenged the self-righteousness of the men with religious power – typified by many of the scribes and the Pharisees. They thought that they were the 'righteous', the ones who kept God's commandments perfectly. They wrote off any who, by their terms, they thought were unrighteous or not righteous enough. Jesus was trenchant in his criticism of such attitudes. In fact, he directed his mission, not to the pious and 'righteous', but to those the pious regarded as unimportant, to those who knew that they needed God's grace and forgiveness. He warned that those who thought they were 'first' would end up being last – and the last – well, they will be first!

I often come back to St Paul's words – 'Let no one think of themselves more highly than they ought to think' (Romans 12.3), and 'Humbly reckon others as better than yourselves' (Philippians 2.3). You see, for Jesus, the 'little ones matter'. In the Church, none is greatest, none is least. We need the grace to submit to one another out of love, to bear one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ, to encourage and build up each other. And when we do it, there is no community on earth like the Church of Jesus Christ. For there, the little ones matter.