



The Church's prayer for Sunday 19th September

Lord of creation,
whose glory is around and within us:
open our eyes to your wonders,
that we may serve you with reverence
and know your peace at our lives' end,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible Readings and Reflection for Sunday 19th September

A reading from James 3:13 – 4:3; 7-8a

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

¹⁷ But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you.

A Gospel reading from Mark 9:30-37

³⁰ They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, ³¹ because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." ³² But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" ³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."

³⁶ He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."



A reflection from Revd Robert Dolman, Minister in Toft LEP

Stuart and Carol Lawrence, twins; Judith Payne; Martin Glennie; Shirley Hobbs; David Keatley; Alison Russell. They are some of the ten or eleven year old fellow pupils I can recall from Miss Davies' class in Coundon Court Primary School, rather a long time ago. Ordinary children from ordinary homes in an ordinary school in an ordinary city suburb.

It was an ordinary childlike one of them who features in our Gospel reading today. The child was not particularly memorable, just average. So average and unmemorable that his or her name has not been recorded. Maybe in old age a man or woman would keep on repeating the story of how the preacher Jesus of Nazareth had singled them out from the crowd, put his arms round them and said words that at the time they didn't understand. Rather like some old people in the nineteenth century remembered how a venerable preacher called John Wesley had laid his hand upon their infant heads in blessing.

What did Jesus think about children? There are two different Gospel stories which shed some light on the question. In the episode we heard this morning, Jesus takes a child in his arms and says, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.' In another story the disciples try to push away the children whose parents want Jesus to bless them. They want to safeguard his privacy. Jesus is cross and says, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a child will never enter it.'

There is a clear overlap in the two stories. The Kingdom is at the centre of Jesus's preaching and children have an assured place in its hospitality. In the one story Jesus identifies himself with the children. To reject children is to reject Jesus himself and to reject God. In the other story we learn that anyone at all who wants to enter the Kingdom must become as a little child.

So Jesus identifies himself with children. This is a remarkable thing to do; he is ranking himself with all those non-persons in his world who have no legal status or social standing. In Jewish thinking children were linked with the deaf and dumb and others without a voice. The central thing about the message of Jesus is that the Kingdom of God is for the little people, the outsiders who are vulnerable, the sick and marginalized who are often neglected and ignored, even despised.

When Christians began to understand that and to embody it in the life of the Church by seeing and treating people differently they were embarking on a quite new and distinctive pattern of behaviour.

For, remember that many human societies, not all primitive and savage ones either, have failed to rise to that level of compassion for those who are helpless and defenceless. In some cultures, for example. it was accepted practice to expose unwanted newly born children; that is, to abandon them on the hillside or in the bush and so leave them to the mercy of the elements and the wild animals. This might be because they were handicapped and could never be economically productive. It might be because they were girls like Judith



Payne and Alison Russell who would not contribute to the military strength of the tribe. It might simply be that they were an extra mouth to feed.

It is important to remember that the Christian mission, with its belief in the unique worth to God of each individual, played a major role in the eradication of this practice. This began in the early Church and the struggle to maintain the value of human lives in this way reaches into modern times.

The nineteenth century Scottish Presbyterian missionary, Mary Slessor of Calabar in Nigeria, for instance, played an important part in the crusade against the infanticide of twins. The native tribes believed that twins like Stuart and Carol Lawrence were an abnormality and that one of the two was a child of the devil. As there was no means of telling which one, both had to be destroyed.

Jesus Christ undermines and subverts the traditional values and practices of society after society. The idols we create and worship are exposed and challenged. Often Jesus calls into question things that are honoured and enquires about the people we have let sink to the bottom of the pile.

And when Christians, like those brothers, the disciples James and John, aspire to be great and squabble for position, they are reminded that Jesus said he would be present in the lowest and most despised members of the social community. They are reminded that their calling is to be servants, not masters.

Some have vigorously opposed Christianity's concern for the weak and the emphasis it places on humble service. The nineteenth century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, thought the weak were parasites on society. Empathy with the weak made you weak yourself. Nietzsche despised pity and mercy. They sapped the robustness of your humanity. And it wasn't the meek who deserved to inherit the earth but the powerful. Nietzsche loathed humility; what fired his mind and heart was his belief in power, conquest and victory. His hero was the Übermensch, the Superman. His ideas fed the mind of Adolf Hitler and his idea of a master race.

Few people today would claim to be disciples of Nietzsche but perhaps some of his ideas about power are more subtly influential than we care to admit.

And our own history in these islands is not unblemished, despite our Christian heritage. It has become fashionable to advocate a return to Victorian values. And there certainly are qualities in the Victorians we can admire: their inventiveness and entrepreneurial vision, their hard work, their evangelical zeal, their mission to civilize the world.

But there is a darker side too. You can read about it in the savage satire of Charles Dickens portraying the squalor of the Victorian slums. At the very age when Stuart and Carol Lawrence twins, Martin Glennie and David Keatley and the rest of us in Coundon Court School were about to transfer to a secondary school for several more years of free education, many Victorian girls were beginning work in unhealthy weaving factories and boys were embarking on a hazardous lifetime, decades, spent underground hacking seams



of coal. One of my grandfathers was one of them. And not all Christians were in the forefront of wanting to change all that.

Even today our track record is badly scarred when children are trafficked from one country to another, or when in boarding schools, voluntary organizations, even churches, children are robbed of their innocence and damaged for life by horrendous abuse. The chilling words of Jesus's parable still rebuke and haunt us: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Then, at the other end of life, in a few years Stuart and Carol Lawrence, twins, and the others, or some of them at least, will be in care homes. It may not always be wonderful but it is a distinct advance on the harsh world of the Victorian workhouse where old couples were often separated and where younger people who had fallen on hard times were given a grim life sentence of backbreaking jobs, crushing bones or splitting rocks, or routine tasks of mind blowing tedium and where a ravenous little one called Oliver Twist dared to ask for more.

What is the test of a civilized society? In 1977 the Vice President of the United States of America, Hubert Humphrey said, 'the moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children: those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy, the handicapped.'

That is a manifesto for the way we are to treat children, and all the little ones whom Jesus welcomes into his Kingdom. What lessons do we learn? Maybe that an Established Church has too often been too closely associated with the rich and privileged. Maybe that a movement like Methodism has too often cosied up to any of its members who acquire celebrity in sport or entertainment or political life. Maybe that the real service of Christ is done out of the public limelight amongst the little almost invisible ones, in giving help and hope.

And what of the saying then, 'Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it'? Some have a bit romantically thought that Jesus meant that little children are pure and humble and innocent and that that is the qualification for entering the Kingdom.

Of course, little children can be like that but they can also be selfish, aggressive, conceited, dishonest, manipulative and rude. Perhaps what Jesus has in mind is precisely their littleness, their inability to cope on their own, their dependence on God. And this after all is sound Christian Gospel doctrine, held right across the board.

Augustus Montague Toplady was a contemporary of John Wesley; they crossed theological swords as Toplady was a rather more extreme Protestant. But one Roman Catholic priest said that Toplady's hymn 'Rock of Ages cleft for me' exactly expresses what a Roman Catholic believes when he goes to Mass: 'Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress; helpless look to thee for grace.'

As we grow older we lose something of the sense of dependence. We lose the sense of awe and wonder at the magic of creation. It all becomes familiar and we are trapped in the drab



routines of mundane daily life, concerned with being in control of things and with securing an identity and a future for ourselves. Wordsworth put it memorably: 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy. Shades of the prison house begin to grow upon the growing boy.'

When Jesus met an earnest young ruler, rich in the goods of this world but desperately seeking inner freedom from the prison house in which he felt immured, Jesus told him that his riches were the problem. He had to declutter his life if he wanted to be in touch with the trusting child within.

He had, to use the familiar phrase, to be born again, to become as a little child. And so it is for us all, from Coundon Court Primary School and everywhere else.