

Wednesday Reflection by David Kennedy

Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous, ⁴²and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward”. *Matthew 10. 40-42*

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 perish’ (Matthew 18.14). This passage carries a dire warning of placing a stumbling block before any of these ‘little ones’ (Matthew 18.6). The conclusion to today’s Gospel is similar to the great parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. Here Jesus speaks of ‘the *least* of his brothers and sisters’. If we honour and serve them, we are blest; if we don’t we are cursed.

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 themselves 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.