

the little ones
 a sermon preached on the
fourteenth sunday after pentecost
 10 September 2017
 at
st john's
 ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Ezekiel 33: 7-11; Psalm 119:33-40; Roman 13: 1-10; Matthew 18: 10-20

How extraordinary that the lectionary gives us this verse in the Gospel reading for today: “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”.

This past week has been Child Protection Week in the community. And in this past week, the Anglican Church’s General Synod – effectively the church’s national parliament that meets every three years – has been struggling with how best to protect children in our parishes. We spent days debating complex legislation – which we eventually passed – including some that will place a huge burden of compliance on all of us. The aim, through these labyrinthine processes, is to convince the wider community that the church is now a safe place for children; to begin the long and painful process of restoring our fractured reputation following the appalling evidence of child sexual abuse that has occurred in churches and church-related institutions. This evidence has come to light over the past couple of decades and particularly in the course of the ongoing Royal Commission. The Anglican Church - all the churches - are very, very anxious about what the Royal Commission will recommend when it hands down its final report in December this year. ‘Little children’ were at the forefront of our minds at General Synod.

The Gospel term “little ones” is not just referring to children, however. It is about all who are vulnerable – children, the abused, the marginalised, the poor, the lonely, the bereaved, asylum seekers, refugees... The list is a long one. And Jesus is not being remotely patronising here about the little people. What he is saying in that lovely phrase, “in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven”, is that the little ones are the really important ones to God. They are continually close to God. God diligently seeks them out, as Jesus demonstrates in that familiar parable of the shepherd looking for the lost, to protect them from the danger of being astray on the mountains.

The danger for us is that we will get sentimental about this talk of little ones and lost sheep, but there is nothing sentimental about it at all. It is radical – dangerously radical, because it turns the usual way of the world upside down, where the important ones are the rich, the strong and the powerful.

Today’s Gospel is part of Matthew’s discourse focussing on life in the community of the church – again, so relevant in the light of the General Synod meeting. Those meetings are always the place where the brokenness of the church at the national level is glaringly obvious. The meeting last week was less divisive on the surface than in previous years, but the divisions were nevertheless very much alive underneath. By the end, when the elections to the key national church committees were announced, it was abundantly clear that the conservative Evangelicals led by the Diocese of Sydney have now completely taken over the national church. There was a lot of heartache on what I might term our side of the church, and real fear for the future. But as I was reminded by a dear friend during the week, God does not call us to be successful, only faithful. And as the Gospel makes clear, the church has never been an unremittingly harmonious and easy place to be.

Matthew is here giving us a clear message about how the church is to behave. It must as a priority offer pastoral care to the vulnerable and needy, not just in wider society with good works and fundraising, but also to the vulnerable within our own church community. In the national church, that means looking out for the small country dioceses becoming seriously depleted in numbers and finance as the result of the changing demographics in our society. In many country towns, schools

and banks and community services generally are closing; the church is one of the few institutions remaining, but at great cost to all concerned, and with increasing difficulty finding clergy and then of course paying them. The loss of people from country churches is one of the reasons that Anglican numbers have dived so dramatically in the Census statistics. Sadly, the big metropolitan dioceses have so far done little to assist the country dioceses apart from some lip service.

The second part of the Gospel passage outlines some clear processes for dealing with the inevitable conflict that arises in the church. Conflict is not to be ignored, but to be faced with the aim of bringing about reconciliation with justice. The Gospel is also realistic, because sometimes despite exhaustive processes – the kind outlined here in the Gospel – reconciliation remains elusive.

Nevertheless, today's Gospel ends with reassurance. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them". We are reassured that no matter how difficult things become, Jesus is with us nevertheless. It is a theme of Matthew's Gospel, that Jesus is always with us, beginning with naming him as 'Emmanuel' – God with us – through to his Ascension, when he promises directly to be with us always. The story of Jesus calming the storm in chapter 8 of Matthew is a dramatic parable of Jesus' presence with us in the direst of difficulties, when he saved the disciples in the midst of a fierce storm that arose without warning on the Sea of Galilee:

A gale arose on the lake, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but Jesus was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!' And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?' ¹

Jesus seemed to be not really present to the needs and fear of his disciples, who were in real danger. The boat was being swamped by waves – the disciples were facing the possibility of drowning. But he was with them nevertheless. He needed them only to ask, and all was well.

We too need only to ask in the terrible times we face, either personally, in our own lives, or in the church at national or diocesan or local level, because God is with us, God is very close – closer than close. In the storm-tossed boat of the church, we need only keep praying and, in faith, keep rowing.

Today's Collect offers us the words to pray at this time:

Lord of the church,
 you call a broken people
 around your table:
 in times of disagreement
 teach us to listen,
 loose us from prejudice
 and bind us to your way of forgiving grace;
 through Jesus Christ,
 who stands at the heart of our gathering. Amen

¹ Matthew 8: 24-27