

*like a child*  
a sermon preached on the  
*twenty-third sunday after pentecost*  
23 October 2016  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
by *fr david moore*, vicar

the lections: Jeremiah 14: 7-10, 19-22; Psalm 84:1-7; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:15-30

Jesus tells the disciples: The kingdom belongs to little children. What does that mean?

It's striking that – in spite of the gospel's relentless witness – we are so readily prone to getting the wrong end of the stick when it comes to 'children', confusing gospel with conventional thinking and mere sentiment. But of course this is bound to be so: since spiritual understanding is evolutionary; and since the *evangelion* of Christ is so counter-cultural, so contrary to the assumptions and values of 'the world'.

But if we have heard all that Jesus has been telling us – on this 'way to Jerusalem' – then we readily recognise, once again, his teaching of reversal, of the upside down, topsy-turvey 'kingdom of God'.

Here's a reminder of what we've been hearing Jesus teach us throughout these Sundays after Pentecost. The poor receive the kingdom of God, the hungry are filled; the rich and the well-filled experience 'woe'.<sup>1</sup> Outsiders and foreigners are the truly faithful and the loving.<sup>2</sup> Those supposedly in their right mind ask Jesus to leave them; the one who was supposedly out of his mind receives and follows Jesus.<sup>3</sup> The Messiah does not come to conquer lands or make empires or make a bigger synagogue; but to undergo suffering, be rejected, and killed, for the sake of new life.<sup>4</sup> Those who lose their life find it;<sup>5</sup> those who try to secure their life lose it.<sup>6</sup> The least is the greatest.<sup>7</sup>

All this, Jesus has told followers, is hidden from the 'wise and intelligent'; but revealed to 'infants'.<sup>8</sup> For kings and religious leaders did not see this; but Jesus' 'little flock' have seen.<sup>9</sup> The worried and distracted and excessively busy are unable to attend to Jesus' presence; while those who attend to the 'one thing necessary' receive the gift that can never be taken away.<sup>10</sup> Those who are preoccupied with outer appearances and demonstrations of success and righteousness are outside the kingdom of God; while those who attend to their own hearts are welcomed into its banquet.<sup>11</sup> One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions; but in richness towards God.<sup>12</sup> For where one's treasure is; there will one's heart be also.<sup>13</sup>

For, according to his gospel, the kingdom is not the grandeur we expect and want; but on the scale of mustard seed and yeast.<sup>14</sup> For the lost have been found.<sup>15</sup> The last are first, and the first last.<sup>16</sup> For all those who exalt themselves, who trust in themselves and their good works, will be humbled.<sup>17</sup> For no one can be Jesus' disciple unless giving up all their possessions.<sup>18</sup>

When we remember this, Jesus' use of the image of 'child' is obviously nothing like our culture's ideas; and quite at odds with the infantilism and sentimentalism to which the church is

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 6:20-25  
<sup>2</sup> Luke 7:9, 36-50  
<sup>3</sup> Luke 8:26-39  
<sup>4</sup> Luke 9:18-22  
<sup>5</sup> Luke 9:24  
<sup>6</sup> Luke 17:33  
<sup>7</sup> Luke 9:46  
<sup>8</sup> Luke 10:21  
<sup>9</sup> Luke 10:23-24  
<sup>10</sup> Luke 10:38-42  
<sup>11</sup> Luke 11:37-44  
<sup>12</sup> Luke 12:13-21  
<sup>13</sup> Luke 12:34  
<sup>14</sup> Luke 13:18-21  
<sup>15</sup> Luke 15:32  
<sup>16</sup> Luke 13:30  
<sup>17</sup> Luke 14:11; 18:9-14  
<sup>18</sup> Luke 14:33

prone. Jesus is almost at the gate of Jericho, his 'way to Jerusalem' will soon precipitate its inevitable consequences. As anyone can see, his spiritual path is most definitely not childish, infantile, or sentimental. It is obvious that in Jesus' teaching, it is not those who are the chronological age of children (with very few exceptions) who are able to undergo this exacting path: it requires mature adults.

Jesus is a teacher of *wisdom*; modelling an exacting and costly – yet truly joy-full, life-giving – spiritual path. This path requires full adulthood and maturity and clear-sightedness; the centering of life in the heart. The kingdom of God 'belongs to children' for this very straightforward reason: only those who are sufficiently 'little' in worldly terms are open enough to receive its astonishing good news.

Thus, the 'ruler' who immediately appears in Luke's story graphically illuminates our problem. We want to list all our accomplishments, successes, good deeds; to pin our righteousness on our sleeves.<sup>19</sup> In passing, I might say that there's nothing quite like a Diocesan Synod to so painfully expose us and reveal the inflated and grandiose 'thoughts of our hearts' in this regard. But we lack the *one thing necessary*: to relinquish all that we would grasp onto – including our reputations and good works and possessions.<sup>20</sup>

The good news of Jesus Christ is as simple, and as difficult, as that! Without doubt, it is as difficult as for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle!<sup>21</sup>

On the matter of camels and needles, I do not trust even for a moment any attempt to rationalise this away with archaeological or architectural explanations – as some commentators attempt to do. These surely miss the point so badly; and blunt the gospel's fresh and frank directness. For this camel-needle metaphor is clearly offered by the Lukan Jesus as commentary, on what he has just said to disciples about the 'little child' who is able to enter the kingdom of God. And Peter speaks for all of us in deep protest at the impossibility of Jesus' gospel.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus invites his followers to be living embodiments of his gospel's fresh and frank directness. The 'child' is that capacity within us which is capable of receiving this fresh and frank directness. Only that which is little and insignificant is open to receiving the gift of the Spirit, willing to relinquish all claims to righteousness and 'sell everything' for the sake of the one thing necessary.

Something of the same spiritual intuition is expressed through the poetic insight you can find on the front page of Contact. It's the 'child' capacity in us who is able to 'start skipping, for no reason', to laugh and love, turn into a leaf, to start dancing, and 'dissolve in the Truth that we are'.

And it's this child capacity that is in fact able – unlike the camel – to pass through the eye of a needle. For this is precisely the life-giving gospel's proclamation: "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God".<sup>23</sup>

[vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au](mailto:vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au)

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<sup>19</sup> Luke 18:18-21

<sup>20</sup> Luke 18:22

<sup>21</sup> Luke 18:25

<sup>22</sup> Luke 18:28

<sup>23</sup> Luke 18:27