

Talk by Thomas Dixon - Sunday 7th June

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? He called a child, whom he put among them, and said 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'.

These familiar words from chapter 18 of Matthew's gospel would surely, like so many of Jesus's teachings, have surprised and confused the disciples. Although they had spent plenty of time in Jesus's company, they were still asking the same old questions, and still expecting a different answer. Something about performing their religious duties, or following the Law? Something about great moral deeds? Jesus's answer presented them with a challenge – and presents us with a challenge too. I'd like to offer some thoughts about how we, too, might become like little children.

First, let's look at what follows those words: Jesus tells the disciples that 'whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.' Humility is not always valued by the world. Whether it's competing for likes and follows on social media, or the way that success in life is often linked to wealth and power, being humble isn't something that comes easily (and I am speaking for myself here too!) As a teacher in a sixth form college, I've had the strange experience in recent days of helping to award my students their A Level grades, as exams have been cancelled. For so many years, success has been measured in terms of exam results, but all of a sudden, the game has changed. I've had some very humbling conversations with students who, in amongst the worry and confusion, have reflected more deeply than ever before on what really matters, not just in education, but in life. More widely, one of the most striking features of life during the pandemic has been the way in which nobody has all the answers; perhaps this is a golden opportunity to re-learn humility, to re-set our priorities, and to become once again like little children.

Moving on to the story we've just heard, of the boy Jesus remaining behind in the temple, we can identify another feature of a child-like faith. Luke tells us that Jesus had stayed, sitting among the teachers, listening to them, and asking them questions. Jesus was, of course, no ordinary child (although we shouldn't deny his full humanity) – but all of us who work or live with children (or can still remember our own childhoods!) know how curious children are. Do we allow ourselves a faith which is curious, which takes risks, which asks difficult questions, both about what we believe, and how our beliefs should shape our actions? Do we allow ourselves to be excited and surprised all over again at the story of our creation and redemption, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost? Last week, we celebrated Trinity Sunday, where we acknowledge the great and wonderful mystery at the heart of our Christian faith. It's easy to run away from mystery, from things that appear complex – but this isn't what children do. Children embrace and enjoy mystery, ask questions to dig deeper, and allow themselves to believe things which may seem unusual or complicated or even plain weird! Do we let ourselves do the same?

And it's reflecting on God, the Holy Trinity, that leads me to a third element of a child-like faith. There's a beautiful quote from St Oscar Romero, the priest who was assassinated for putting his faith into action and confronting the corrupt and brutal military regime in El Salvador. In a sermon for Trinity Sunday, he proclaimed that:

God is not a solitary being; God is three; God is family; God is communion; God is love shared among three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

At the heart of the mystery is something quite simple – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit united by shared bonds of love. A child-like faith is not simplistic; as we've seen, it leaves room for mystery. But it can help us to uncover and remember simple truths: that God is love, that love is at the heart of our faith. It was in love that God created the world, and in love for the world that Jesus died on the cross. The way of love is victorious in the resurrection of Christ, and, as we call on the Holy Spirit, we grow in the fruit of love. A child-like faith which remembers that simple truth enables us to read again those words we've heard from Genesis, chapter one- that human beings are made in the image and in the likeness of God- and to live them out by loving one another. Those words remind us that every human being is precious in the eyes of God, that all lives matter. But it is precisely because all lives matter that when we see certain groups being oppressed, and certain lives being squandered, that we must, as Christians, speak out. It's why, right now, we have to shout, without any qualification, and without hesitation, that black lives matter.

A child like faith, which practises humility.

A child like faith, which is unafraid to ask questions and embraces mystery.

A child like faith, which places love at the centre.

May that be our goal, today and always.

Let us pray:

God the Father, all of humanity is made in your image; fill us with compassion as we see your children suffer.

God the Son, you embraced those whom the world rejected; give us your hunger for justice.

God the Holy Spirit, you give us the gift of courage; make us strong in speaking out against oppression.

God the Holy Trinity, you are three in one, united in love; help us to put love at the centre of all we do.

Amen.