

Homily By Fr. Paul Jones

Jesus was a master story teller, taking analogies from the simple peasant life around Nazareth so that we are able to picture graphically the truths that he wishes to share. Yet there are a few times when his analogies may make us wonder.

Take this morning's gospel when he likens the Kingdom of God to those who are like little children. Jesus was never a father; he never parented infants -- so maybe we can excuse what at first glance appears to be gross romanticism.

The Kingdom of God is like a little child? Really? Granted, an infant is cute. A father feels pride standing at the hospital window as the nurse holds up the child and mouths the words, "He is yours." However, it is a bit different the first night home, when at 2am that beloved little child wants to be fed and demands it with unending screams. The romanticism fades further when one has to change a stinky diaper at 4am. Or the terrible two's--when the child's insistence is, "I want what I want and I want it now! Then there is the yelling: "I'll do it my way!" Or the temper tantrums when they are three years old. "I hate you!" Or when they are four and you have keep going to the sandbox to yell for them to stop throwing sand -- or hitting each other with toy shovels.

So in order to understand what Jesus has in mind, we need to look at the disciple's question that evoked Jesus analogy of the little child. The disciples did not ask what the Kingdom of God is like, or why is it coming, or where will it be, or even when will it arrive. No! Listen to their revealing question--"WHO will be GREATEST in the Kingdom of God?"

Here we have revealed their ongoing preoccupation. Will I be the greatest, number one? James and John even got their mother once to intervene, trying to get tickets for the seats next to Jesus in the Kingdom to be. If their ploy would have worked, they probably would then have started arguing about who would get the seat at Jesus' right hand.

Here we find ourselves facing the primary sin that confronts us Christians every day. It is the sin of pride – the arrogant obsession with I, me and mine. Even Paul experienced this, especially in his ongoing rivalry with Peter.

Therefore we need to notice that when Jesus indicates that the greatest in the Kingdom of God is like a child, that is not the conclusion. Immediately he tells a second parable, this time about a little child-lamb who gets lost, presumably because of his arrogant mischievousness, defiantly wandering away. In the dark, as he cries out helplessly in desperation, the unexpected hand of the shepherd touches him. Shocked, he grasps the hand, and within minutes the two of them are happily skipping together all the way home.

The child that Jesus has in mind is the one who has experienced the need for taking the hand of God – together, always, wherever they go: lamb and shepherd, child and parent, humanity and God.

Today's Old Testament lesson drives this point home. To Israel, Moses says: "I am old and will not be going with you into the promised land." Then Moses takes the hand of Joshua, the one who from early youth had faithfully followed Moses, and tells the people: "He will take you by the hand and lead you." But most important of all, Moses continues, Joshua can do this only by taking the hand of God, for God shall cross over first. God is the One who will never fail or forsake you. Therefore Joshua is a model for the childlikeness that Jesus had in mind – one who is willing to trust his hand in the hand of God.

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Lord, you keeping cutting out a path for us in the wilderness, but sometimes we want to find our own way. God have mercy.

Christ you take our hand so that we will always have a traveling companion; but sometimes we prefer to go it alone. Christ have mercy.

Lord, Your Spirit provides us with ongoing energy for the trip; but sometimes we prefer to sit and watch the other travelers go by. Lord have mercy.

May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.