

Who are the little ones Jesus talks about in the gospel?

In the verses that precede the gospel, we hear Jesus taking hold of a child and tells his listeners, whoever wants to be greatest in the kingdom of God should be like a child. We do know that children are vulnerable, weak, humble and fully dependant on the care and provision of their parents/guardians/carers. As to what qualities of a child the disciples are called to embrace, they are not immediately clear.

As we progress through the text towards our gospel, we realise that being like children requires total submission in humility to those who possess power and authority over us. Little children, therefore, means those who are obedient in following God's commands, ordinances, statutes and provisions, acknowledging that they are wrong, ever seeking guidance to be re-directed to the Lord's purposes. They follow what the Lord requires of them regardless of whether they understand it or not. They do trust the Lord, just like a child relies on the caretaker for survival.

In our gospel when Jesus talks of the little ones whose angels are in constant touch with the Father, it is apparent the little ones include all obedient servants of God. They include children, the crippled, the blind, the lame, those with all forms of disability, widows, orphans, widowers, those who commit their lives to care and support the vulnerable in various ways, and so on.

It is important to note that the little ones are not restricted to human beings but also the vulnerable creatures in this world that God created. Reflecting on the recently concluded General Synod in Melbourne, our Archbishop Kay reminds us about the significance of holding "*a special Day of Prayer for creation,*

like the one that the Orthodox and Catholic churches have been keeping for many years on the 1st of September” ending up with St Francis Day on 4th October.

In the news we have heard at least in the past about the impact of climate change on the great barrier reef and recently the floods and landslides in Nepal. This is not a distant matter from us. Significantly it is worrying especially when we consider the *impact* of climate change ‘on the coral reef, wildlife habitats, our farms, and the people. This is worsened by scientists’ prediction of an upcoming Australian dry summer.’ It’s more disturbing when we consider the poor and the vulnerable, the very ones Jesus says their angels are in constant communion with the Father in heaven.

As the gospel states, the Father does not desire any of his sheep, his vulnerably obedient followers to be lost. He would be at the forefront searching out for them and restoring them to their rightful place – the imagery of a lost sheep.

God’s loving embrace for the vulnerable is echoed in Jesus’ teachings in relation to reconciliation among ourselves and our effort to reach out to anyone going astray, away from the community of faith.

Rather than engaging ourselves in gossip and escalating a bad behaviour of a break away individual, Jesus exhorts us to reach out compassionately to that person in privacy. If no progress is achieved, He urges us to engage in confidence, one or two people to reconcile the matter. And if this effort doesn’t lead to a desired outcome; the church should be involved in this reconciliation. If we fail to succeed, we are to relegate the offender to the outskirts of the faith community.

All these painful steps express the deep love of God who desires every lost sheep to be found and be restored to the sheepfold. And when the lost individual is found it triggers a glorious celebration.

Some time back when I was overseas, I had a roommate in a shared University accommodation. I experienced challenges. When my roommate entered the room, he would quarrel trying to stir me up for a fight. Just because I didn't understand the matter behind his behaviour, I kept calm.

A few days later when he was sober, I addressed the situation. It restored comfort, trust and a sense of joy. This episode happened a couple of times throughout that academic year.

Eventually, he was transformed becoming a better person and since then he became one of my best friends. At the end of that year a silent observer asked me, how did you manage to live peacefully with your roommate. He disclosed to me my roommate was a man who made fighting part of his lifestyle.

Our gospel invites us to live within our means, urging us to endeavour to confidentially reconcile our differences within a closed group. A breach of this matter risks exposing the matter to outsiders – the nonbelievers portrayed as gentiles and tax collectors in our text.

For whether we will commit to this exhortation of Jesus, is a matter for you and I to reflect on, bearing in mind the eternal consequences of our decisions. Jesus urges us to let go of these earthly concerns and submit to Him for our eternal benefits.

The Lord be with you.