

Christmas Eve 2009

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In St. Mark's gospel we read the following story about Jesus and children:

"People were bringing little children to him, for him to touch them. The disciples scolded them, but when Jesus saw this he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. In truth I tell you, anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.' Then he embraced them, laid his hands on them and gave them his blessing" (Mark 10:13-16 NJB)

Christmas is for children.

It is not for naught that we celebrate the birth of a child this night. In light of St. Mark's gospel, and some subsequent scriptures I will be sharing, we have a profound truth to ponder: the kingdom of God belongs to children and only those who welcome the kingdom of God as children will enter therein. I don't think Christ was referring exclusively to literal little boys and girls, but also to a state of mind, a way of being that we sophisticated adults have largely forgotten.

We need to quiet the chattering of the monkey mind; that realm of the analytical, judgmental, narcissistic, and largely unconscious that renders us unable to see that we are already in the kingdom of God. We are already there! And Christmas offers a perfect reminder of this fact.

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In St. Matthew's gospel we read:

"The disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?' He called a child, set him in front of them, and said, 'Truly I tell you: unless you turn round and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. Whoever humbles himself and becomes like this child will be greatest in the kingdom of Heaven, and whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (Matthew 18:1-6 REB).

The point is made more pointedly here, perhaps. Jesus is trying to settle an argument his disciples are having about status and position: "Who is greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?" Again, Jesus uses the image of a child to

illustrate the foolishness of such thinking. Isn't the one with the most money greatest? Isn't the one with the most degrees greatest? Isn't the one with the most esoteric knowledge greatest? Isn't the one with the most meticulous religious practice greatest? Isn't the one who sacrifices the most for his or her family greatest? Isn't the one who knows all the right answers greatest? Isn't the one with the most sophisticated theological explanation greatest? And please don't misunderstand: there's a place for these ideas. I could have given a sermon on the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the hypostasis of the Logos and Man. But these are pretty words for adults to conjure *after* they've mastered the basic truth of the Kingdom. But the wealthy, the degreed, the celebrity, the sanctimonious are not 'greatest in the kingdom of heaven.' No. "Whoever humbles himself and becomes like [a] child will be greatest in the kingdom of Heaven."

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In a similar vein, St. Luke records the following: "Jesus. . .took a child, stood him by his side, and said, 'Whoever receives this child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me. For the least among you all is the greatest' (Luke 9:47-48 REB). We ought to be encouraged by these words though they were clearly meant as an admonishment, probably because Christ's students were so often missing the point; just as we do. According to Thomas Moore, we too often want to turn Christ into a moralist and his religion into a codification of our virtues or lack thereof. And then what do we do? We focus on the 'lack thereof' in others while applauding ourselves for being so much better. We've turned God into Santa Claus, checking his list of whose naughty or nice. I'm sure there's even an iPhone application for ticking off our good behavior and alerting us when we've failed. Meanwhile, we've missed the mark, blinded by our goodness—real or supposed—so that we cannot imagine the reversal of the status quo implied by Christ's statement: "the least among you all is the greatest."

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If you can manage to be around some children during this blessed holiday, then watch them closely and notice the purity of their joy, their delight in the present moment, the depth of their hope, and the reality of their love. If you cannot be with children tonight or tomorrow, then turn inward and embrace that child within; that little boy or little girl who remains unsullied by the world, the flesh, and the devil. I realize that pop psychology has turned the idea into a cliché, but forget about that for a moment if you can and look at the spiritual truth this night provides: God became a little child and insists that we become as little children in order to enter the Kingdom—not some celestial Disneyland where we remain eternally infantilized, but the

Kingdom of awe and beauty and loveliness and mystery already spread before us if we would but have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Let me conclude with the following testimony from the apocryphal gospel of Thomas: "Yeshua saw some babies nursing. He said to his students, These nursing babies are like those who enter the kingdom. They said to him, Then shall we enter the kingdom as babies?" (Thomas:Logion 22)

Yes, else we shall not enter at all.

And now to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, Three Persons in one God, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all honour, might, majesty, power, and dominion, now, henceforth and for evermore. Amen.

Msgr. Tony Howard

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