

"EXCEPT WE BE AS CHILDREN"

INTRODUCTION On the first page of what he calls his "Anti-memoirs", Andre Malraux writes of meeting a priest in the underground Resistance during World War II.

"Tell me, Father" he asks, "What have you learned after listening all these years to all these confessions?"

The priest replied:

"I have learned that people are not as happy as they appear to be, and that none of us, finally really ever grows up..."

I love that answer. There's something tender yet tough in what the priest was saying, something not only true but very wise, wisdom being rooted in compassion. And, of course, he could have gone on to say that the two were not unrelated - our unhappiness and our failure to grow up. For instance, in the story read for our Scripture Lesson, the disciples came to Jesus obviously to settle a childish dispute which must have been causing them considerable pain. They asked Him, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?"

DEVELOPMENT Had I been Jesus, I think my heart would have sunk at hearing such a question from the lips of my own disciples. Isn't it bad enough to covet and compete for the choice places in the Kingdom of earth? Must we now drag all this competition and envy into the Kingdom of Heaven? Grow up!

Of course it's just possible that the disciples had a foresight of things to come. The other day I heard a delightful story of a doctor who upon arrival in heaven found a long line waiting at the gate. "Well" he thought to himself, "As on earth, so up here in heaven....the lines are for patients and not for the doctors". And so he went to the front and proposed to St. Peter that he simply be allowed to pass on in.

But St. Peter took a different point of view and said to him, "Listen friend - doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief...whatever...there's no difference up here. Just get yourself in line and wait your turn." Somewhat embarrassed and chastened, this doctor took his place in line. After about an hour he heard someone whistling to himself, and looking around saw to his great amazement a surgeon all dressed in green from his floppy pants to his little green hat. A little white gauze mask hung jauntily around his neck. As he passed St. Peter, the surgeon waved and walked right in, thus avoiding the long line at the door.

"My word" said the doctor standing in line. "They must have changed the rules; perhaps I should go back and speak to St. Peter again". And so he returned to the front and proposed once again that he be allowed to proceed.

When Peter got angry, the doctor held his ground. "But you let the other doctor in". "What doctor?" said Peter. "The one right there" said the doctor pointing to the receding figure of the surgeon dressed in green.

"Oh...oh" exclaimed Peter. "That's not a doctor. That's God. He likes to dress up and play doctor."

"When I became a man, I gave up childish ways". That familiar line of St. Paul is one of aspiration only to most of us. As the priest said, "None of us finally really ever grows up". So, why in answer to the disciples does Jesus call a child into their midst saying:

"Unless you turn and become like children
you can never enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

(And the Kingdom of heaven can never enter you!) Maybe, Jesus is pointing out the difference between being childish and childlike. To the childish arguments about who is the greatest, he's saying "childlikeness" is the only greatness!

HUMILITY Last Sunday morning a small child was presented for Christian Baptism. Alexis Roosa who will soon be four months old was baptized in our service with her grandparents present as well as an aunt and uncle. It seems to me that one at least of the wonderful things about Alexis is that she is totally honest about her dependence on the love of her parents. She's very "up front" about it. She is objective, if you will, and humility is being objective. It's being free from pride and from arrogance.

St. Paul was merely being objective when he said, "Not I, but Christ who dwells within me." St. Paul had many gifts and he was free to enjoy them all because he didn't have to take credit for any. How free we all would be from the tireless competition and envy that gives us pain if, with Alexis, and St. Paul, we had more of this child-like spirit or quality of dependence on our heavenly parents; if with St. Paul, we could recognize that whatever is of good is of God. "Not I, but Christ who dwells within me."

"Truly, I say to you - unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

Jesus is talking about what we might call "the grace of dependence". There is nothing obsequious about being dependent, nothing weak. Christ wasn't obsequious, and He was the strongest man ever to have lived. So why hesitate to become like children. Children of God - childlike, not childish. It can only cause us much happiness. And maybe, we'd finally grow up!

WONDER Humility is not the only characteristic note of childhood, although it is the one that Jesus emphasized in this story. But while we are on the subject, we might as well mention at least two others - deeply religious in nature. One is a sense of wonder. Chesterton wrote:

"The world does not lack for wonders, only for a sense of wonder".

And children are full of wonder. They're always "wide-eyed". They are always squealing in amazement or in delight. The only good thing about the heat of a NYC Summer is that all over the city you hear the ecstasy of the water squeal. And when the hydrants are turned off you can watch children going about the serious business of puddlegazing - wondering how so much sky and earth could be captured in such small bodies of water.

Our spiritual health depends on our continuing capacity to say, "Isn't that amazing...isn't that wonderful!" Wonder-full.

As we sang Beethoven's "Hymn to Joy" melody this morning as we began our service, I thought of something Beethoven said because it certainly applies to his Ninth Symphony from which the "Hymn To Joy" melody is taken. In a statement as rash and noble as any of his works, Beethoven said, "He who understands my music can never know unhappiness again". Marvellous. And when you think that Beethoven broke all the rules and turned out pieces of breath-taking rightness, it is amazing.

"The world begins with wonder" said Aristotle. He should have gone on "And ends with wonder, too." As adults, we need to recapture some of the "wonder"...

CANDOR Humility - free from pride and arrogance. Wonder. And also, candor. It's amazing, isn't it, that children, faster than anyone else, can usually spot a phony. You who are parents: how many of your guests have been ungraciously un-masked by your children? No search committee looking for a new minister or for a college president, or for the president of any company, should be without a child of about 9 or 10 years of age. After all, it was just such a child in Anderson's Fairy Tale who pointed out, "the emperor has no clothes."

So praise the Lord then for the children - for their humility, their sense of wonder, their candor. Except we become as they, the Kingdom of heaven will never be ours.

CONCERN FOR CHILDREN But we can't take leave of these verses and this passage of scripture without measuring in the harshness of the words of Jesus, the depth of his concern for the well-being of children. Verse 6 as you may or may not remember reads:

"But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."

That means, friend, drowned with such a weight that you could never be brought up for a decent burial. He had a deep concern for children. I wonder. Do you?

The sin of causing others to sin - it's one of the worst in the world. Years ago in East Harlem I knew a juvenile delinquent who refused to say "The Lord's Prayer" because he had had enough of fathers, he said. His own on earth had deserted him. Most juvenile delinquents are like that. They are delinquent because they have never really been juvenile. They have never had the care, the protection, the love, the warmth they needed. They're like some of those young birches that you now see up there in Maine and New Hampshire - in the forests, twisted and bent all over. The storms of winter hit them before they were ready. Now, no such amount of warmth and sunshine can ever straighten them out again.

But we cannot blame alone the vanished fathers or the mothers with little room in their busy lives for their kids, when the parents themselves are the victims of a somewhat twisted social order. In the sixties we preferred to put one man on the moon rather than millions of our fellow citizens on their feet. The babies of that decade are today's older teenagers. It's not surprising that many are delinquent.

But instead of seeing that our love for children, like God's love for the world is communal in scope...inclusive and not merely personal....instead of assuming responsibility for the sins that cause others to sin, we often end up trying to insulate ourselves in childish fashion from our responsibilities. We need to exercise more compassion, more imagination and adventurous Christian action.

We have to take some risks. We have to make more room than we are for helping young lives. We need to move out on faith, remembering that nothing is ever accomplished without faith. Said Jesus:

"See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven."

Let's hope their Guardian Angels will soon have better things to report. Meanwhile, here on earth and in places like this parish, may Christians assume responsibility to help lead and guide the young lives entrusted to our care. Take on a class for instance, working with children and grow in the process.

Said that Priest spoken of in the beginning:

"I have learned that people are not as happy as they appear to be...and that none of us, finally, really ever grows up."

But I believe that if we cease to be childish, and become more childlike - humble, trusting, open, honest - we just might. Anyway it's worth a try. Let us pray that we may be led to move in that direction.

PRAYER God, our Father, help each of us to put away childish things, and become more childlike in spirit - humble, without pride, arrogance, lust for power, for position, to be open and honest. Help us like children to be more trusting, to be open and never to lose our sense of wonder at all that which daily surrounds us in life. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen