

"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 is 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 that Renee 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 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 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 proceed on in.

But St. Peter said to him, "Listen, friend - doctor, lawyer, merchant, thief....there's no difference up here. Just get in the line and wait your turn". Somewhat chastened and embarrassed, this doctor took his place. 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 went on in, thus avoiding the long line.

"My word" said the doctor. "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" explained Peter. "That's not a doctor. That's God. He likes to 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 This afternoon a small child whose mother was brought up in this Church will be presented for Christian baptism. Peter James Wicker is about six months old. What's his greatness, you ask? It seems to me that one at least of the great things about Peter James is that he is totally honest about his dependence on the love of his parents. He is very "up front" about it. He is "objective", if you will, and humility is being objective. It's being free from pride and from arrogance. Where love is, there is no will to power.

St. Paul was merely being objective when he said, "No 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 Peter James, 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..."

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 puddle-gazing - wondering how so much sky and earth could be captured in such small bodies of water. Our spiritual health depends on our continual capacity to say, "Isn't that amazing...isn't that wonderful!"

As we sang Beethoven's "Hymn to Joy" melody this morning as we began, 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's amazing.

"The world begins with wonder" said Aristotle. He should have gone on "And ends with wonder, too."

CANDOR Humility...free from pride and arroganze. Wonder. Also, candor. It's amazing, isn't it, that children, faster than anyone, 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 nine or ten 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 cry hosanna then for the children@ 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 leave this story 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, my friend, drowned with such a weight that you could never be brought up for a decent burial. We had a deep concern for children. Do you?

The sin of causing others to sin - 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 are like some of those young birches that you now see up there in New Hampshire and Maine...in the forest...twisted and bent all over. The storms of last February hit them before they were ready. Now, no amount of warmth and sunshine can ever straighten them out again.

But we cannot blame alone the vanished fathers, the mothers with no room in their lives for their kids, when the parents themselves are the victims of a 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 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 sin that causes others to sin, we're trying to insulate ourselves in childish fashion from our responsibilities. We have recently passed in NY State some legislation that makes it possible to put thirteen year olds away for life. We are clamoring for our own safety rather than for more compassion and imagination and adventurous Christian action.

Christians, I believe, have to take some chances, some risks. Yes, we need to be more adventurous, more than we are. To move out on faith. Nothing is ever accomplished without faith. Aren't we always being called to risk something big for something good? Yes, if we love our church, we must take chances. "Faith" someone once put it "is courage that has said its prayers".

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 Park Avenue Methodist Church, may Christians at least assume their responsibility for the sins that cause others to sin...to assume responsibility to help the young lives entrusted to our care.

Said that Priest I spoke 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. It's worth a try. Let us pray that we may 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, open, honest. Help us like children to be more trusting, to be more open and never to lose our sense of wonder at all that which surrounds us. In the spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen