

1992: ST. MICHAEL'S CONFERENCE SERMON

*"Except ye be converted and become as little children
ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven."*

I've always wondered what Our Lord meant when He said what He did about us becoming as little children. This has always been a great puzzle to me particularly because although I love children and would do whatever I could for their well-being, I don't like them all that much. Needless to say I've spent more than a few sleepless hours wondering what Our Lord Jesus had in mind when He said: "unless ye become as little children ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

There are some people who think that Our Lord's directive that we become as little children means that we behave like children in their spontaneity and liveliness. I try to avoid people who think that way and I can assure you that this was not what Our Lord had in mind.

Others say that becoming as little children means that we imitate their innocence. But children are only innocent insofar as they lack knowledge, and we can be certain that this is not what our Lord intends for us.

The key to understanding Our Lord's meaning is found in today's Gospel reading in which Jesus says that we must humble ourselves as little children. Our Lord's command has to do with humility. Adults think that they must somehow earn and acquire all that they have. There is a certain pride which comes with being able to say that all that we have is ours by our own efforts, by the sweat of our brow. But there are some things we can't possibly earn. We cannot earn God's forgiveness, or God's love, or God's grace or God's Kingdom. These must be given as gifts. Just as children receive all that they have from their parents and those set over them in authority, so we must humbly receive these gifts of God. We can have them no other way. This is what Our Lord means when He says we must become as little children.

Are there yet other ways in which we might imitate children? I didn't think so until recently I heard someone speak of a child's capacity to be totally present with you. I thought about what they said and realized just how right they were. There is nothing quite like being in the company of a small child. They are with you completely and totally.

Children are totally present with you physically. This is particularly true of babies but is also true of small children. You have to feed them, change them, hold them, keep an eye on them, comfort them, and treat their wounds when they encounter life's sharp edges.

Children are also totally present with you emotionally. A day spent in the company... of a small child is a day when you encounter the entire range of possible human emotions. Children can be hysterically happy one moment and, well, just plain hysterical the next moment. Children go through these emotional highs and lows because they tend to will things entirely. When they want something, they want it absolutely like it's a matter of life and death.

Children are also totally present with you in their thoughts. A day spent with a child is a day in which you will answer, or at least be asked what seems to me at least to be an average of about a thousand questions a minute. What's that? What for? Why? How come? Can I have it? A child's thirst for knowledge seems unquenchable.

This is what it means to say that children are totally present with you in a complete ' sort of way. They are present with you in their thoughts, in their will, and of course physically. This is exactly how we must be present with-God if we are going to live in His Kingdom, and this is just the thing for which this St. Michael's Conference has been preparing you.

This is the reason why we have invited you here and spent time with you teaching courses and leading you in daily worship. It is so that we may learn to be totally present with God.

We need to be totally present with God in our understanding. This is why we have encouraged you to learn about the essential teachings of our faith in the Bible, and how it is understood in the spiritual and theological tradition of our Church. Only by asking questions and discussing our faith in a deep and real way can we expect to grow in our understanding and be renewed in the spirit of our mind.'

We must also be totally present with God in our will. We must be present in our heart as well as our head. We must not only know what we should do but also desire to do what is good. Our faith must be marked by an increasing desire, a growing will to draw closer and closer to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Not only must we know and desire God's will for our lives, we must also put into practice and actually do the will of God. This means that it is not enough to simply come to this conference, learn a lot of stuff and perhaps be stirred up for a while. You must also be present with God physically. You must get yourself to church, actually read your Bible and other spiritually helpful books, and say your prayers each and every day in a disciplined sort of way. You must actually, physically put into practice what we have tried to show and teach you here. God wants it no other way because He loves you totally. He has given you a physical existence and a heart and mind so that you may love and know Him even as you are loved and known by Him.

Everything I'm trying to say is summed up in a few words: "fighting the good fight of faith". We have come to this conference in order to raise up an army. You are that army! I'm sure that you have no idea how it is so inspiring for us each year on the final night of the conference to see the pageant in which you assume the various roles which demonstrate the work of God's church. It is so inspiring because you are in fact that church, and when we see you at this conference learning and living your faith, we are all reminded of what our church is really all about.

As I was in my car last Monday waiting in line to board the ferry, I was having a conversation with Mrs. Westin who was waiting in her van in the line next to mine. I jokingly asked Carolyn what class sixteen month old Lucia Westin would be teaching this year. Carolyn said that Lucia would be teaching a course on the end of the world because "she's close enough to the beginning to know something about the end." I thought that was the most profound thing I'd heard in years.

This conference is a beginning, and we pray that the good work which God has begun in you will be perfected. If you have enjoyed this conference then please keep this one thought in mind. Something of our end is present in this beginning. In Heaven we shall see our Lord Jesus face to face. We shall see and we shall know. We shall know and we shall love. We shall love and we shall praise. We have tried here to give you a faint glimmer, a little taste of that which is to come.

Please pray for one another, write one another, and encourage one another in the Christian faith. Please also remember that you are in our prayers, in our thoughts, and very much in our hearts.

In just a moment we are going to act upon what we have learned by drawing near and faithfully receiving the Body and Blood of Our Saviour Jesus Christ. We do this so that we may be in Christ and Christ in us. We seek to be totally and completely present with Him and in Him in faith by humbly receiving His gifts of grace. Let us come to Him and dwell with Him completely, like little children.

"At the same time some of his disciples came unto Jesus saying who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called a little child unto him."

The Rev'd D. A. Petley
St. Michael's Conference
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