

Parish Mission 2017

Sanctifying Your Work & Life

Church of St. Martha

Becoming Like Little Children By Caryll Houselander

Believe me, unless you become like little children again, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew xviii. 3).

It is encouraging and pleasing that Our Lord does not tell us to remain, but to become, as little children. And that it is little children we are told to become like, not adolescents.

An ordinary child, who has not been warped by ill treating or spoiling, is, until he is ten years old, a more complete human being than he will ever be again. He possesses humility and simplicity, in the true sense of those much-abused words. He has the capacity for total joy and total surrender. No memory and no experience of the power of time to dull and to heal can take away one jot from his eternal now. His reactions to other people are absolute, his love is without alloy. His trust is without question or doubt. His values are true; he is untouched by the materialism of grown-up people. Even when he selects among the things that adults give to him as the things of a child, he shows the superior wisdom, and exquisite rightness, of a young child's values in his choice. He discards the expensive toys that are offered to him in favour of those things which are useful or beautiful—or both—and which in some way mean communion with adults. For the little child loves adults, wholly beyond their deserts. Just before he leaves his childhood, he has, like a grace, an absorbed love for little things, like tiny shells, for their own loveliness.

Humility, which cannot be separated from real simplicity, is part of young childhood. Children do not become bitter because they are treated as little and insignificant: they take it for granted that they are so, and to them it is as necessary to love and to be loved as it is to eat and drink.

If we could go back to nurseries that are no more, and see what is left in them when the children went away, we should find traces of human nature in its essence, as convincing as those found in the caves, where the earliest known men left their signature of humanity in sanguine on the walls.

For the child under ten is, like the cave man, an artist and a poet, and, made as he is in the image and likeness of God, he has the elements of lover and father and mother within him.

In the nursery we would almost certainly find, among the discarded and broken toys from the big store, marvellous pictures drawn in coloured chalks, in which the sun has a smiling face and a halo of scarlet rays; a boat cut out of a small piece of soft wood; bricks built into a little house; marbles and shells; and, among the mutilated bodies of murdered rich dolls, one cherished old rag doll or moulted teddy bear that has been submitted to the glorious, fair wear and tear of love, which has flattened its nose but left it triumphant.

To go back to childhood means that we must get back true values, instead of those that are based on materialism, public opinion and snobbery; that we must regain simplicity and humility, that we must become makers and poets again, that we must regain the capacity to experience fully whatever we experience at all; and, above all, we must regain the courage that is partly a boundless zest for living and partly an unquestioning trust in an all-powerful love.

There are adults who do achieve this going back to childhood, but they are in the minority, because few have this trust and the courage it brings with it. Courage not only to take the necessary steps to return to childhood after we have grown up, but courage to grow up in the first place.

Those who fail to grow up do not remain children. What happens to them is this: they become fixed in their adolescence. They remain emotionally and mentally incomplete all their lives—perpetual adolescents.

Most of the few women who have achieved psychological maturity have at least one old school friend who is fixated in the upper fourth or the lower fifth; whose thought and interest and conversation is all concerned with the old days at school; whose emotions are those of a school girl. She suffers more than her mature friend is likely to realize. She is continually grieved because the other has outgrown her and is no longer even capable of thrilling to the old excitements and sentimentalities of her adolescence. She is constantly "hurt" by, and jealous of, the mature affections and wider interests whose claims her former "greatest friend" puts before her own. She looks back wistfully to the days when notes were exchanged under the desk, declaring total surrender to the tyranny of almost paranoid friendship, including pledges not even to be on speaking terms with potential rivals. This is one of the most obvious forms of perpetual adolescence; but pitiful though it is, it is far from being the most fatal.

This state is by no means confined to women; on the contrary, there are even more adolescent men, men who are dogged all through their lives by the schoolboy that they used to be. Sometimes it is a hearty, insensitive schoolboy, who thinks an excess of food or drink, or any other appetite, is amusing; but far more often it is an unhappy, shivering boy, who infects the man with the same fear of life that he brought to his first term at his public school.

The perpetual adolescent does not grow up because he—or she—is afraid to do so. Afraid of life: of grown-up responsibilities, of working for a living, of independence, of making decisions, of taking risks; afraid of falling in love, of making a home, of having children; afraid of sickness, of growing old and of dying.

Our Lord's words are a challenge. To become a child is a challenge to our courage. It demands, first of all, that we dare to grow up, to give ourselves to life, to accept life as it is—and above all, to accept ourselves as we are.

Many people are permanently humiliated because they cannot accept themselves as they think themselves to be. They are humiliated by a feeling of futility and frustration, which does not seem to fit in with their worldly success. It is not a fanciful feeling. They are people in whom the supernatural life is undeveloped and even unguessed. They feel—and rightly—that there are unrecognized depths within them, possibilities which no one knows of, and which they themselves cannot bring into the light. They know instinctively, though they would seldom admit it, that to be a man without spirituality is hardly to be a man at all, but the materialism of their environment has strangled their capacity for spirituality.

Hardly any man, however proudly carnal he may be, wishes to believe of himself that he has no religion at all. The man who does come near to that asserts and reasserts, with the overemphasis of the unconvinced, that he has his own religion.

Humiliated by their own not understood, but deeply felt, spiritual impotency, men try to compensate by material success. They try to fill the emptiness within themselves by money, position, flattery. They try to answer and quieten the unappeasable longing to achieve the glory of complete humanity by the achievement of human power; and a humiliated man who does manage to grasp power over other human beings is a potential danger to the world, far more terrible than an atom bomb or bacteriological warfare. For no man who does not nail his hands with the hands that nailed Christ to the Cross, and does not plunge himself into the magnitude of the littleness of the Infant Christ, is safe to exercise power.

Ideologies could not come into being without this epidemic humiliation, for they depend on a multitude of young men and young women identifying themselves with a human leader. Every member of the group accepts the ideas of the leader. He accepts the leader's mind and his conscience. He lives, not by his own conscience, his own will, but the conscience and will of the leader, until the time comes when he has no will but the leader's. He loses sight of his own lack of mind and of purpose, and of his own limitations and littleness, and he abandons all personal responsibility for his own thoughts and actions. He is always in fancy dress. He is always acting a part, and in time he really believes that he shares the force and genius of the leader. Thus, for a time, he has a drug to anaesthetize the ache of his own humiliation.

Even when a group is passive, group mentality fosters delusion and pride; but when the group is driven—or "led"—into action, it simply becomes the most dangerous and most horrible of all things, crowd mentality. Identified with a crowd, possessed by it, a man who is really just and temperate behaves like an irrational creature. He will blaspheme, lynch, murder, all without any sense of his personal responsibility. He is in worse case than a man who is drunk, for he is not only himself out of control, but has in him the uncontrolled evil in several hundreds or thousands of other men too.

Undoubtedly many who thronged the Way of the Cross buried curses and insults at Christ only because they were possessed by a crowd. Had they had the strength to be alone, perhaps, like St. Veronica, they would have wiped the spitting of that crowd from the suffering face of Innocence. The only identification which deepens a man's awareness of his personal responsibility as a human being is identification with Christ. The only solidarity with others which enables an individual to be wholly himself, and yet really one with all other men, is the Mystical Body of Christ. This is less an organized than an organic oneness:

"A man's body is all one, though it has a number of different organs; and all this multitude of organs goes to make up one body; so it is with Christ. We too, all of us, have been baptized into a single body by the power of a single Spirit, Jews and Greeks, slaves and free men alike; we have all been given drink at a single source, the one Spirit. The body, after all, consists not of one organ but of many; if the foot should say, I am not the hand, and therefore I do not belong to the body, does it belong to the body any the less for that? If the ear should say, I am not the eye, and therefore I do not belong to the body, does it belong to the body any the less for that? Where would the power of hearing be, if the body were all eye? Or the power of smell, if the body were all ear? As it is, God has given each one of them its own position in the body, as he would. If the whole were one single organ, what would become of the body? Instead of that, we have a multitude of organs, and one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of thee, or the head to the feet, I have no need of you. On the contrary, it is those parts of our body which seem most contemptible that are necessary to it. . . ." (I Corinthians xii. 12-23.)

It is not only the spiritually starved who are humiliated, and who escape from the realization of their grown-up responsibilities into perpetual adolescence, but also many pious people, Catholic and non-Catholic alike. There are countless people among them who will not accept themselves as they are, and who warp their own natures by dwelling continually on the supposed injustice which has made their destinies mediocre. They feel that but for cruel and frustrating circumstances they would have been famous. Had they been wealthy, or given a better education, they would have developed their talents and won recognition. Varying the theme, had not their pampered upbringing stifled initiative, had they been pricked on by the spur of poverty, like so many great men, they would have fulfilled their genius. They live with the grievance, refusing to use the talents that they have, because no one recognizes the talent they have not.

Others escape from their humiliation into daydreams of personal aggrandizement, a pathetic tendency often seen, as if under a microscope, in school children who, when the dramatization of illness and the telling and retelling of stories that they at last believe fails, will often resort simply to mystery, and mystery never fails. "I have a secret." And the secret is that they have no secret!

Grown-up people, too, resort to mysteries and wishful fantasies, and sometimes they not only dream and talk about them, but live them and thereby complicate other people's lives. There are people whose vanity is such that in times of danger they do not see the people around them objectively, but only themselves in the role of heroine, at the centre of things; and, only to support this role, take unnecessary and unwarrantable risks and compel others to take them with them.

Think, too, of the innumerable people who, in order to seem—to themselves as well as to others—to be richer than they are, or socially superior, or more successful, live lives of petty dishonesty; owing bills, often to those who are too poor to be kept waiting for their money, or money to friends who are too delicate to ask for it; living on credit; being underhanded and grasping in business: paying the minimum wages; living extravagantly themselves, while they let their obligations slide; shutting their eyes to the real needs of their unimportant neighbours and entertaining those from whom something may be gained; exploiting weakness and kindness wherever they find it; and desecrating themselves by deliberately childless marriages.

To keep up pretences, human beings will sacrifice their deepest human needs. What can have so complicated them, and made them so ill use themselves? They are complicated because the world is complicated, and they are trying to adjust themselves to the standards of the world.

All this is the exact opposite to the simplicity of childhood. Simplicity is not—as so many think, and, alas teach—silliness. Simplicity means not being complicated, not being double in any way, not deluding oneself or anyone else. The first exercise in simplicity is to accept oneself as one is. There are two tremendous results of this: one is humility; the other, that it enables other people to accept us as we are, and in this there is real charity.

People whose demand on others is simple and uncomplicated add to the life of the world. One of the main reasons for devitalization, depression and psychological tiredness is that we make complicated demands on one another.

Everyone has, so to speak, his individual income of psychological energy—some more, some less. Everyone, in his relations with other people, makes a demand on that energy. There are normal demands, which result in a fair give-and-take, and there are abnormal demands, which result in a dreadful deprivation. Some people cost us a lot of energy; they are expensive to know; unless we have abnormally high psychological energy, they exhaust us. Others make only the slightest demands, and others actually give.

The expensive people are those who, because they are not simple, make complicated demands; people to whom we cannot respond spontaneously and simply, without anxiety. They need not be abnormal to exact these complicated responses; it is enough that they should be untruthful, or touchy, or hypersensitive; or that they have an exaggerated idea of their own importance, or that they have a pose—one which may have become second nature, but is not what they really are. With all such people we are bound to experience a little hitch in our response. If we are not sure that what they say is true, we are embarrassed. In time, our relationship with them becomes unreal. If we have to consider every word or act in their company, in case it hurts their feelings or offends their dignity, or to act up to them in order to support their pose, we become strained by their society. They are costing us dearly in psychological energy.

The individual who is simple, who accepts himself as he is, makes only a minimum demand on others in their relations with him. His simplicity not only endows his own personality with unique beauty; it is also an act of real love. This is an example of the truth that whatever sanctifies our own soul does, at the same time, benefit everyone who comes into our life.

One immediate result of accepting ourselves as we are—which is becoming simple—is that we stop striving to reach a goal which means becoming something that the world admires, but which is not really worth while. Instead we realize the things that really do contribute to our happiness, and work for those. For example, we cease to want to be rich or successful or popular, and want instead the things that satisfy our deeper instincts; to be at home, to make things with our hands, to have time to see and wonder at the beauty of the earth, to love and to be loved.

To work for real human happiness implies unworldliness, the kind of unworldliness that is usually a characteristic of artists, who—in spite of glaring faults—prefer to be poor, that they may be able to make things of real beauty as they conceive it, rather than to suit themselves to the tastes and standards of the world.

To accept oneself as one is; to accept life as it is: these are the two basic elements of childhood's simplicity and humility. But it is one thing to say this and another to do it. What is involved? First of all, the abandoning of all unreality in ourselves. But even granted that we have the courage to face ourselves and to root out every trace of pretence, how shall we then tolerate the emptiness, the insignificance, that we built up our elaborate pretence to cover?

The answer is simple. If we are afraid to know ourselves for what we are, it is because we have not the least idea of what that is. It is because we have not the least idea of the miracle of life-giving love that we are. There is no pretence that can approach the wonder of the truth about us, no unreality that comes anywhere near the reality. We are "other Christs." Our destiny is to live the Christ-life: to bring Christ's life into the world; to increase Christ's love in the world; to give Christ's peace to the world.

What contemptible pigmies our most exalted ambitions and fantasies are beside this, the reality!

The acceptance of life as it is must teach us trust and humility. Because every real experience of life is an experience of God. Every experience of God makes us realize our littleness, our need, our nothingness, but at the same time the miracle of Christ in us. Not only are we one of God's creatures—which is in itself a guarantee of His eternal creating love—but we are also His Christ, His only Son, the sole object of His whole love. These two facts balance the scales of trust. Our nothingness and our allness.

If, in the light of this knowledge, we give ourselves unreservedly to life, every phase of it, every experience in it, will lead us back to the inward heaven of spiritual childhood.

"All the way to Heaven is Heaven," says St. Catherine of Siena, and this is a thousand times true of the heaven of spiritual childhood, because it means becoming, not any child, but the Child Christ who is the life and the heaven of the soul.

Life should make full circle from birth to death that is rebirth. The ordinary experiences of adult life, offered to everyone if he will take them, are work, friendship, love, home, children, rest, old age and death. Within these—varying and alternating—poverty and riches, success and failure, forgiving and being forgiven, dependence on one another, illness and recovery, the illness and recovery of those whom we love, sometimes their deaths. The experience at the core of every other, giving all the other experiences their significance, making them fruitful, is simply love. When we love, even the sufferings that our love makes more acute throw us upon the heart of God and teach us the wisdom of childhood.

Poverty when those whom we love are dependent on us, illness when those whom we love are in danger of death, teach us our own insufficiency, our dire need of God. We learn not from outside, but from the depths of our own hearts, the meaning of Christ's words: "Without me you can do nothing."

In our tenderness for those whom we love, above all in our love for children, we know God in His image and likeness in ourselves. Knowing Him thus, we cannot fail to trust His tender pity for us.

From coming to know God as our Father through our dependence, and as Father and Mother and Lover through His image in our souls, we learn the simplicity, the humility and trust of children, but only if we dare to love one another—if we accept the loves that come to us in our lives, saying to each one as it comes: "Be it done unto me according to your word," accepting the love and whatever its cost may be, the responsibility of it and the labour, the splendour of it and the sorrow.

As we grow old, we regain our likeness to little children even outwardly. It is in surrendering to this that we make our old age a thing of beauty and peace. We become dependent on others. Our pleasures become fewer and simpler, more and more like those of a child. We let go, at last, of the struggles of the complicated years that are over. The hopes that are no more, the foolish little ambitions, the forgotten griefs. Bereavements cease now to be loss, and change to the anticipation of meeting our living dead again very soon. Our values become true again, we distinguish as unerringly as a child between the essential and the inessential. Our memory goes back to dwell again in the morning of our life. Thus, when death comes, we are able to accept this greatest of all our experiences with a child's capacity for complete experience, and dying we are made new.

There is nothing that is so irksome as the ache of an old wound, and it is from countless old wounds, old sores and weals and suppurating sores and gangrenous wounds that the world is bleeding to death. It is old wounds that are poisoning the life-stream of humanity.

It is no wonder that there has never before been so conscious a longing for a "new Heaven and a new Earth."

Men look more wistfully on the first leaf of Spring than they have ever done before.

To wake one morning to see the first prick of green on a city tree is to experience joy like the receiving of a sacrament.

To look out of the window upon a patch of blue sky newly washed with rain is an experience as poignant and sweet as a sudden vivid memory of childhood, in which for a moment we walk on thinly sandalled feet through the long, dewy grass of a tangled garden that is no more.

So old are we, so old our aching wounds, that loveliness which is actually here and now seems to be a memory. The heart cries out to be made new and to renew the earth.

This is precisely what happens when we become children. We are made new: our newness renews the earth. We are restored to the sense of wonder. We see the stars, the coming of Spring, the familiar faces of our friends, the white bread on the table; for the first time we dimly apprehend the mystery of the sacramental quality of the substance of our daily life.

Our values become true. A child does not think or feel in terms of materialism. He does not despair or even worry a little, when the material world collapses.

In little things of no value he receives the Sacrament of the Universe; his jewels are chips of salted and frosted glass that he finds on the seashore; he listens for the sound of the sea in a hollow shell, and he hears the song of God.

To become a child is to know with a child's intuition, to see with a child's vision. To see everything with the amazement of seeing for the first time and with the spontaneous giving of the whole heart that is the unique joy of first love. To see human suffering, not with an adult's reasonable despair, but with a child's immediate, unquestioning compassion, that admits no obstacle to its response.

Within our own lifetime we have witnessed a wonder, that of those who are only children in years becoming Christ-children, much more truly children than they were—and these children simply take every small suffering in their lives and offer it to God. They do not question the worth of their immolation, God holds the scales; in one side is their littleness, in the other they put the love of the Infant Jesus.

If anyone becomes a child, that is the Christ-child, or if he only recognizes the presence of the Divine Infant in his life, the sense of futility leaves him. The Divine Infancy in us is the logical answer to the peculiar sufferings of our age and the only solution to its problems.

If the Infant Christ is fostered in us, no life is trivial. No life is impotent before suffering, no suffering is too trifling to heal the world, too little to redeem, to be the point at which the world's healing begins.

The way to begin the healing of the wounds of the world is to treasure the Infant Christ in us; to be not the castle but the cradle of Christ, and in rocking that cradle to the rhythm of love, to swing the whole world back into the beat of the Music of Eternal Life.

It is true that the span of an infant's arms is absurdly short; but if they are the arms of the Divine Child, they are as wide as the reach of the arms on the cross; they embrace and support the whole world; their shadow is the noonday shade for its suffering people; they are the spread wings under which the whole world shall find shelter and rest.