

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Greatness in the world—power, connections, wealth, influence, reputation and learning—only counts for something in the Kingdom of God when put at the service of the most vulnerable of our society. Greed, riches and pride are so alluring, so seductive for us in the Church, as much as for those outside it, that we need to regularly examine our consciences to assess the motivations and results of what we are doing, and why we are doing it. When I read today's Gospel, however, I also feel sad. I cannot help but reflect on how unintentionally prophetic Mark was being in linking the prediction of Jesus' passion with the status of a child.

The safeguards now needed in response to the criminal and scandalous behavior of a very few leaders in the Church, means that many bishops, priests, religious and teachers can no longer follow Jesus' example and take children in our arms. I fully understand why this is the case, but the fact that we have to be so careful about the care of our children and have strict protocols and legislation which covers such behavior toward children is a necessary and, nonetheless, tragic moment. It's also a moment for us to remember the passion of those who have had to endure the trauma of destructive behavior. As the Jews say of the Holocaust, "to forget is to commit the same mistake again." At its most basic level the latter part of today's Gospel reveals what we would expect of Jesus—he likes children and they like him.

It's amazing how a couple of pieces of information can sometimes change the way a scriptural story is read, and its importance for our lives today. We know from other documents of the same period as the New Testament that children in first century Palestine had no rights. They were possessions of their fathers, and they could be bought and sold, exploited and even killed without any recourse to the religious or civil law.

One way in which a child was publicly claimed in this society was that only their immediate family could touch them. The story, then, of Jesus embracing the child in public was in itself a social challenge to accepted customs. But it's much more than that. In taking the children in his arms, Jesus declares that they are possessions of no one, but they belong to us all as gifts. In the family of God, children are accorded the dignity and respect we would give to God.

Today's Gospel tells us that those who deserve our attention and esteem are the ones who are the least, the most at risk or those who put their talents and gifts at their service by making the world a better place for them. Just as he did in the market place of Galilee when he took the children in his arms, Jesus has a habit of turning our world's values upside down.

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