

St. Michael and All Angels

I take as my text today, from St. Matthew's Gospel:

And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

This passage from St. Matthew, which, interestingly, was chosen for the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels primarily for the reference to Angels in the 10th verse, is a fortuitous choice for what it reveals about a basic quality of those who desire to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

This passage also has the potential to be easily misunderstood, especially in the light of St. Mark's Gospel, in the 9th chapter, verses 33 thru 47. Perhaps, the difficulty comes from the one passage in Mark where Jesus is addressing the virtue of caring for children, whereas in the passage from St. Matthew, He is addressing the virtue of child-like character.

Not to be confused, in the passage from Mark, Jesus is concerned with how His disciples seek out opportunity to help others, rather than to curry favor with those of influence and wealth while disregarding those in need.

However, in the passage from Matthew, Jesus is taking on a different matter, using the child as an example. Indeed, it becomes more apparent, as we more thoroughly consider the passage, what Jesus is trying to convey to His Disciples.

Simply interpreted, Jesus is saying to His Disciples that to enter into the kingdom of heaven, you must have the character of a little child.

What does He mean by the *character of a little child*?

Let us consider the answer in the context of the question that was asked by one of the Disciples: *Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*

Most certainly, the question itself indicates that the Disciples were clueless as to what the kingdom of heaven was all about.

So, Jesus tells them they're really heading in the wrong direction and need to turn around. By associating the kingdom of heaven with earthly ambitions and personal power, they were going away from the kingdom, not towards it. The kingdom of heaven was not about prestige or the exaltation of self.

To illustrate what He was talking about, Jesus calls to a little child and takes him on His knee. Perhaps it was Peter's son, though there is a tradition that the child was St. Ignatius of Antioch, who was martyred around the year 107.

Regardless of who the child was, the point that Jesus wanted to make was clear: it is a child-like character that should mark those who would enter the kingdom of heaven.

As Jesus continues, He leaves a distinct impression of what that child-like character should be, and, also, what it means to put a stumbling block in the way.

There are three attributes of this child-like quality: humility, dependence, and trust.

1. Humility. A small child is awed by the wonder of the world and is quick to forgive and forget when treated unjustly.
2. Dependence. For a small child, dependence is a given; children seem to understand that they cannot face life alone.
3. Trust. Children instinctively trust their parents, that their parents will care and provide for them, and protect them.

If we were to find one word that would sum up the child-like quality, it would be innocence.

This, says Jesus, is what we must be like, if we want to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

We must forget self and look to service, not power. We must shed our self-absorption and fill our hearts with love.

In humility, we look to our neighbors; in trust and dependence, we look to God.

Yet, we must take heed not to be a stumbling block to a little child. Here, we must be mindful of a double sense in the way the word *child* is used.

Yes, a small child is to be cared for and protected; taught and nurtured and loved. To do otherwise is to have a millstone hanging from our neck.

But *child* is also the name given to a disciple. The Disciples of Jesus were His children, and thus extended to include anyone who is a beginner in the Faith.

What a sin it is to mistreat a child; what a sin it is to stand in the way of another's Faith in Christ; it would be better to have a millstone hung around one's neck.

There was the millstone in the home that women used to grind the corn; then, there was the millstone used by the miller; so large it was turned by a donkey.

The reference used in the passage for millstone was actually two words from Greek: *mulos onikos*. The stone, *mulos*, was so large that it needed a donkey, *onos*, to turn it.

To have such a millstone hung around the neck and to be drowned in the deep of the sea illustrated the gravity of the offense.

If we, then, follow the double meanings of the passage and focus on the virtue of child-like character, we can begin to understand the simplicity of our attaining to the kingdom of God.

Acknowledging the infinite love of God shown through his Son, Jesus Christ, and desiring to share in the eternal life He has offered to us, a share in the kingdom of heaven; we are bound to turn around and head in the direction of the kingdom.

The turning around comes in our becoming child-like in character, putting on Jesus Christ and forgetting the self, indeed obliterating the self in a life of service, focusing on the kingdom of heaven as the most important thing.

This may seem radical;⁵ but Christianity is radical; it is a radical change of focus from the earthly to the heavenly, from ourselves to others. Our focus must be God-ward.

Can we become child-like in character?

All things are possible with God. Even those of us who are most hardened; who are weather-worn in the pursuit of self-centered goals; who have forgotten what it is to be awed by even the simplest of everyday miracles; even those can be turned around and headed in the right direction, toward the kingdom of heaven.

If we ask how? Well, the first step is acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. It follows then that we must accept the Grace and Love of God that is extended to us, freely given, a divine gift.

As we turn around, there is the light of the Cross to guide us; the Holy Spirit to strengthen us; and Jesus Christ Himself to receive us as joint-heirs of His heavenly kingdom.

In concluding this passage, Jesus refers to *their angels*. Indeed, by the time of Jesus, the Jews had a highly developed angelology. There was an angel for everyone and everything, and, naturally, it was believed that every child had a guardian angel. These angels had the right of direct access to God.

Thus, in Christianity, we find comfort, through the words of our Lord, that there are unseen powers for good, who serve to praise God and to benefit us in ways that are beyond our imagination.

Now, as children, for we are the adopted children of God through baptism, we shed our worldly ways and take upon ourselves the innocence with which we entered into the world, demonstrating our faith in Jesus Christ through our demeanor and character as Christians.

As adopted children of God, we have the assurance of Jesus that we are not alone; and among the helps that are provided for us are Angels. Just as the Angels came to our Lord in time of trouble, so they come to us in our innocence. As we struggle against our spiritual enemies, we are assured that we have Michael the Archangel behind us.

As we acknowledge the reality of St. Michael and All Angels in this festival of the Church, so, in the wonderful celebration of the Holy Eucharist, we join together with the Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven in worship and adoration of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; we laud and magnify his glorious Name; and we evermore praise him, the Lord God of Hosts.