

22 November 2020—The Last Sunday of Pentecost (Christ the King Sunday)

Matthew 25:31-46 (Year A, Proper 29)

One of the joys of being a parish priest is interacting with small children. Children between about 3 and 8 are especially watch-worthy; they have the beginnings of self-awareness but are not yet self-conscious. As an example, some years ago I observed a 5-year old child at after-service hospitality; he was gleefully skipping around the Parish Hall, weaving in and out among the small groups of chatting adults, talking to himself, oblivious to everyone, everything around him; he would stop occasionally for a ‘dance,’ an animated monologue to no one in particular and would then skip on. He repeated the ritual round and round the parish hall. He was utterly unselfconscious, completely ‘in the moment.’ Children are “innocent,” often unaware of their effortless spontaneity.

Adults usually equate innocence with morality, even naivete. We assume ‘innocence’ means being unaware of evil and therefore immune to its allurements. There is a deeper meaning. To be innocent is to be without guile or cunning, artless, simple; not calculating effect or cause. Did you note the ‘innocence’ of those Jesus calls righteous in the Gospel (verse 37): *Then the righteous will answer..., “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”* Here is one among many examples of innocence in the Bible: In Jesus’ story they are called righteous who simply respond to basic human needs of clothing, shelter, food, illness, or economic hardship. The righteous do not calculate goodness. Consider Jesus’ Parable of the Prodigal. When the lost son returns the Father responds with spontaneous joy, restoration, and blessing. The Father does not ponder a “fitting” response; the reaction to the son’s return is unselfconscious and extravagant. Contrast the elder brother’s manipulative response. There are, literally, too many such examples of innocence in the Bible to relate in a brief sermon.

Where does innocence ‘come from?’ Children are born innocent—society teaches us to be calculating and self-conscious, it is not our ‘natural’ state; for us jaded adults we learn innocence through relationship with God. Innocence is what a child-like relationship with God looks like; without guile, calculation, or cunning; artless, simple; not reckoning effect or cause.

Today I have two simple suggestions to foster holy innocence. The first is to pray this—*Your will, not mine, be done in me today*. Make this a continuous refrain: *Your will, not mine, be done in me today*. This is an all-purpose prayer. Offer it first thing in the morning and throughout the day. When waiting at a stoplight or for something to download, say the prayer and keep repeating it. When alone or with others, offer it. Instead of watching inane TV commercials, say the prayer until your program comes back on. Just pray the prayer and keep on praying it relentlessly and see what happens.

The second simple suggestion is this: Do the next right thing. What the Church needs more than anything else is a spirit of child-like innocence and spontaneity in the areas of hospitality, gratitude, and happiness. Do the next right thing and leave results up to God. Our part is to be of maximum service to God and those around us. Doing the next right thing makes life not only simpler but more joyous.

Innocence cannot be coerced or contrived. It is up to you and me. Do you desire to do God’s will—because you are God’s beloved and God is working in you and through you in remarkable ways? Do you desire yet more of God’s deep, abiding joy? Are you willing to do the next right thing for God’s glory? Do you believe holy thoughts, kind words and works of charity build treasure in heaven? Do you want the gift of spontaneous innocence which is ours in Christ? Such a life is not reserved for innocent children; it is everlasting life in Jesus.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.