

Sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie street, Sydney 20th September 2015 by Rev Ross Smith. Lectionary: Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37.

Last and Least

In a scene in Tennessee Williams' *A Street-car Named Desire*, the unlovely, desperately seeking love Blanche meets Mitch. Mitch is grossly overweight, sweats profusely and is frantically lonely. It is their mutual weakness, not some imagined strength that brings them together.

Needy as they both are, they recognise each other as the one who is right for the future and Blanche is able to say, speaking for them both, "Sometimes there's God, so quickly."

Places of weakness in our lives and in the world may be where the amazing intrusions of God's presence is discovered. It may be where God's greatest treasure is left and found.

Today we celebrate places and people where God's values are found amongst people and things that are often given little or no value by our culture and ideas of the good life. We bless flowers taken to the lonely, aged or ill. We value those who now contribute less than they used to.

We, today, have the gift of a lay-preacher being acknowledged as Alan Harper takes up his commissioning for the bringing of the Word to gatherings here and beyond. In the past, and where today there are shortages of ordained ministers, lay preaching is a valuable bonus to the life of the church. A weakness in available staff can become a strength in witness.

There are some texts in our Scriptures that require us to re-imagine what is taking place, in this case between Jesus and his disciples. We tend to read into a text something that comes from our culture or belief or value system.

This may make us unaware of the original impact, the thing that really shocked or amazed Jesus' contemporaries. Children today are prized and desired. They were not in Jesus' time.

Such, I believe, is the case with our gospel today. We have read into Jesus' remarks about children our different attitudes toward the little ones. "When you welcome even a child because of me, you welcome me," he said. That sounds sweet, cloying to us.

Yet what Jesus intended was not meant to be sweet at all. He was saying "whoever receives and honours the most insignificant, least valuable person is receiving and honouring me." The children of his day were regarded as of little value, a burden, dependent, helpless, non-productive.

The apostle Paul wrote that he once thought and acted like a child, but when I became a full human being "I put away childish things." People listening to that or reading it at once thought children are so low on the social status system that they hardly counted at all. Once you became adult you became a proper person. You had value, you counted.

If you and I had the task of relating or re-telling this story of Jesus and his disciples you and I would have to speak about receiving and honouring the ones regarded as the ones having least value, least significance and thus truly receiving the one we call Lord and Saviour.

St Francis of Assisi identified the beggar who was also a leper as the least valuable person in his day, so he went and embraced him and called him brother. He discovered he had embraced and honoured the Lord Jesus. It was also Francis who imagined the stable scene with the beasts of the field being present at the birth of Jesus. They were elevated into first witnesses of the birth of Jesus.

In our day we can make a list of the things or groups or people who are not generally regarded as being of importance. They may, however, be on the lists of humanitarian organisations or on the lists of people who are concerned for the environment or what the future generations are going to face if we don't change our value systems and what we want out of life.

The future may be regarded as a little child that we can receive, honour and embrace. Some of our

politicians and shock-jocks appeal to our selfishness, our greed, our desire to exclude the needy and thus in fact jeopardise our future whilst claiming to look after our interests.

Caring for the environment is something that farmers, miners, governments and international organisations are taking up more seriously. Degradation and over-use causes irredeemable damage.

Alternative practices such as solar and wind power preserve the environment and the future, and should not be side-lined. Even the banks are reading this message and refusing to fund ventures that are environmentally destructive.

Looking after the poor, the outcast, the hungry, the wretched of the earth mirrors the actions of the Lord who serves the lowly, exalts the humble, who receives even children. This is the Lord who calls the church to be a servant people, just as he imaged himself as the suffering servant of God.

Our future is like a child, vulnerable, dependent and pushed out of touch. It needs to be always a part of our planning as a nation, as a church, and as a congregation.

The context of Jesus' remarks about receiving the little ones, the lowly, least valuable ones, is his journey toward Jerusalem. The journey toward the cross, the crucifixion.

Jesus is focussed on being the servant Lord. The disciples are focussed elsewhere, on their own worth, greatness, and journey to triumph, as they thought being in the train of the Messiah would entail. Each wanted places of honour, best seats at the ruling table.

What a shock they got. It's not going to be that way at all, says Jesus. Turn away from your own drive for importance and focus on making someone else important. Turn away from attending to your needs and attend to the needs of others. Be a servant people, not a ruling class. Give value to the ones who are not valued. If you want to be great you must be the least.

When a minister or a lay preacher is preparing a sermon, as we were reminded last Sunday by our guest preacher Rev Dr Warren Lee, the focus of thought and imagination is to be on the needs of the listeners. Not on how well the preacher imagines he or she is coming across, or tackling the text or message for the day, or what words of affirmation might be said as people come out of worship.

It is a servant's job to be attentive to the needs of those he or she is serving, and in the case of the church, the congregation is in turn to be enabled to be a servant church ministering to the needs of the community or society in which it finds itself.

These values are different from the values inculcated by our society, which honours independence, freedom, liberation, having a good career and treasure in bank or investment. Here we are talking about focussing on interdependence, the bondage of servant-hood, the needs of others and the long-term future. A kingdom with a very small door, where only the lowly get to be great.

In our gospel text today, we encounter not a great God, but a small, childlike, weak one who is tugging at my robe, trying to get my attention, trying to lead me toward the kingdom, a kingdom with a very small door.

Places of weakness in our lives and in the world are where the amazing intrusions of God's presence happen, and where God's greatest treasure is left and found. As we shall soon sing "...yet still our human cares and needs find in his heart a place." (T i S #235 v.3)

The disciples were weak and not understanding, afraid to ask, and ignorant of how to take up the cross and value Jesus' choice of being the suffering servant. So God intruded and left the treasure of welcoming the last and least as the true way of life.

C E V Mark 9:37: "When you welcome even a child because of me, you welcome me. And when you welcome me, you welcome the one who sent me."