

Trinity 16 – Rev'd Martin Booth

We are all well aware of how much we love, respect and value our children today.

How we enjoy them; their innocence. And the way they engage in their simple pleasures, and their world of magic, wonder and imagination. Which, I know is how our S.E.A church is being treated even as I speak.

However, we have a habit of transferring these 21st century ideals and cultural values on to Jesus' time.

Sadly, this means that some of the relevance and the very telling points Christ makes to his followers are sometimes lost.

And we end up being the poorer for it.

Such is the case in our Gospel reading today.

Jesus is speaking with the twelve; the wider group of disciples; and anyone else who will listen.

He is saying things that would without question have shocked, even outraged them.

Because children in the ancient near east were not valued at all. Worse.

Until they came of age - which in those days was perhaps twelve years old - they were considered non-persons.

In many senses of the word they did not exist.

They were invisible. Nothing. No-one.

When Jesus says - in one of scripture's most familiar passages - that the disciples were to 'suffer the little children' to come to him - that word 'suffer' in the King James Bible is very accurate.

For, it would be a matter of dismay, pain, even disgust that Jesus commanded his disciples to let the children through the crowd of adults and be welcomed by him.

Jesus was not just stepping across cultural and religious boundaries. He was trampling all over them.

So here in our passage, Jesus is telling his disciples, and any one who'll listen.

And we here today.

That we are to become like those children.

In short: to become nothing.

No-one. Invisible. Ignored. Disregarded. Rejected by the world and its ways.

We notice, of course, that this in fact turns out to be Jesus own ultimate destiny in his earthly ministry.

He would be hung on the cross as a criminal. Hung there for public ridicule, and rejection.

He too became, in the world's eyes, in the world's ways, Nothing, no-one. Invisible, rejected.

In fact, Jesus echoes this idea more than once.

For example, when he declares that the first shall be last and the last first. Or when he talks about loving life in this world and losing it, or losing life and keeping it.

But why does Jesus encourage us to empty ourselves, to become as nothing?

Following God as little children is not just about following him with a simple innocent belief - though it is that, too.

Following God, as people who have emptied themselves and become, as it were, invisible in the world's eyes, brings about a freedom, identity,

but, especially, a purpose - far beyond anything we think we can gain in other ways. Worldly ways.

Let us consider, for a moment, soil. It's dirty and unpleasant. Especially in autumn and winter when it turns to mud.

It's just a nuisance. Of no use to us at all. It gets on our shoes, our clothes, under our fingernails. We certainly don't want it anywhere near our lovely homes and carpets.

But we perhaps forget that this self-same soil holds within it the means of our very existence. The wheat for our daily bread grows in it. It provides grass for our livestock. It nourishes and sustains the trees and the flowers that protect us from the toxins in the atmosphere so that we might breathe clean, fresh air.

The ancient Greek word for earth is Hummus - hence the name of the Chickpea and olive oil dish we find in our shops and restaurants.

Hummus, however, is also the root word for humility.

Out of the good earth (that is a people who empty themselves, become as nothing, so that Christ might abide in them) grows life and goodness in abundance, as God created it to be from the beginning.

When Jesus invites us to empty ourselves, to become as nothing - the way little children were treated in ancient near east, he is inviting us in fact to become part of something far greater. To prepare the ground ready for planting. So that we might bring forth everything that is at the very heart of all that is good, in and on God's good earth. Amen