

## 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 11.25-30

*You have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.*

It is much too tempting to take this as a proof-text for infant baptism. Not only is it the case that any cognitive and conceptual advantage that age or education confers pales in comparison to our fundamental ignorance of the divine mystery, but there might—so Jesus here asserts—even be some impediment laid by our experience and expertise. It is, perhaps, the wrong kind of experience, shaped as it is by a fallen world and a corrupt culture. It is, perhaps, a misapplied expertise, trained as it is on particular notions of achievement and success. If so, then our epistemic situation vis-a-vis theological matters is no better than that of a small child; it is potentially worse.

We don't really believe this, of course. If we did it would make little sense to lament the state of theological education in the Church of England, as some of us are wont to do. We would simply construct a pipeline that goes from our Sunday Schools directly

to faculty positions at universities and theological colleges. (I can tell that some of you are now having rude thoughts about the status quo relative to this fanciful scenario...) But we don't really think that well-educated adults are worse off than preschoolers, when it comes to our knowledge and comprehension of the faith.

Nor does it help as much as you might think to take a less literal approach here. It is entirely plausible that Jesus isn't really comparing adults and children at all, but drawing a contrast against the religious experts of the day and the relatively uneducated laity, and especially the poor. Matthew's Jesus is particularly critical of Pharisees, after all. In theory—maybe even ideologically—many of us are sympathetic to some kind, some version of anti-elitism; or, more positively, we are eager to assert the value of forms and sources of knowledge distinct from academic knowledge. Those of us whose business is academic knowledge might feel most acutely its limitations: we know, better than most, what we do not know, and even what we cannot know, at least for now.

But again, this intellectual commitment to ways of knowing apart from those prized by examiners and tenure committees seems not to be reflected in our regular practices. We guard our pulpits jealously. And

it seems meet and right so to do: the task of preaching seems too important to entrust to anyone but the wise and understanding—God help any who dare to climb these steps.

And yet, it cannot be that we contradict our Lord so flatly. There must be some sense in which Jesus is right to say that God has revealed something to little children that is concealed from the rest of us. And despite the many ways in which we strongly prefer adult and academic modes of thinking and talking, we do—I believe—have some sense of what Jesus is saying here. There are things of spiritual import that most of us adults have forgotten, which most children know, not just at a propositional and articulate level, but deeply, profoundly.

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Parenting is a hard slog. There are lots of ups, but also, there are lots of downs. Little children can be foolish to the point of danger; and they can be beastly in ways strongly reminiscent of madness or demonic possession; and they can be so selfish and self-absorbed to be proof positive of the doctrine of original sin on one hand, and evidentially problematic for the doctrine of baptismal regeneration on the other. Were

our Lord not a childless bachelor, I'm not sure he would have been so dewey eyed about little cretins.

And so, inevitably, despite our best intentions, parents sometimes just lose it with our children. And there is yelling and the threatening of consequences and the imposition of punishment, and all those things that, a few weeks later, we feel the need to disclose to our confessors and therapists, not to mention our parent-friends over some hard beverages. Maybe there are some parents who never yell at their kids. I don't trust them; probably, they are psychopaths.

But here's the thing about children—I know, I know, not all children; such an overgeneralised claim would never make it past peer review at a child developmental psychology journal—but with all those caveats in place, here's the thing about little children: after a disastrous morning—one of those mornings with the kids squabbling over nothing, with the simplest tasks for getting dressed seemingly herculean because of the meltdowns over not having those tiger-striped socks, with the being late for nursery because breakfast has taken so long we could've read *Ulysses* cover to cover—[after a disastrous morning] when we then pick up the child from nursery just a few hours later, the look of their face when they see you is...some kind of miracle, some kind of sign of the fact—the God-

honest truth—that love is stronger than all that stuff that happened in the morning.

And so, we apologise to our children for having yelled at them; in my case, reluctantly, because after all, they were the ones being impossible in the first place. My therapist will have something to say about that; my confessor too, probably. And, in response, they say, it's OK, still beaming from the sheer joy of seeing us at the end of the day, which is itself an embodiment of the fact that it *is*, in fact, OK, that we have been forgiven our own tantruming. And we tell them we love them. And they ask, "Even when I'm naughty?". And we say, "Of course"; but they know that already. The tragedy is that, one day, they will—like we have—outgrow this knowledge, having learnt that love is so commonly a conditional thing, contingent, even fickle; or at least, the thing people commonly call "love". Sometimes they will have learnt it from us, which is the greatest tragedy of all, for which God will hold us to account—this Jesus, who so valued little children, and entrusted them to the likes of us.

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Perhaps it is too trite and saccharine a thing to say, but here it goes anyway: what children know, which grown-ups have forgotten is that we are loved even when we are naughty. And it is something to be thankful for indeed that such knowledge seems intuitive, even innate to little children; God knows that life has a way of corroding such faith in love's power, which only has any hope of being regained at all because it has been planted in us from the beginning, a natural grace.

And children know too *how* to love accordingly, loving even us, who have taken their toys away just because they threw them down the stairs, who mysteriously refuse to magically dry for them their tiger-striped socks that they dropped in the toilet, who bafflingly reject their request for the blue plate clearly sitting in the dishwasher, who yelled at them rhetorical questions about the causes of their transgressions.

May we too know our unconditional belovedness. May we too learn how so to love.