

CLOSE OF COMMUNITY RETREAT, 2012

Of the many memorable things Fr. John said during our community retreat that ends this morning, I expect we all recall his mention of once attending a wedding in a church of another denomination and finding in that church only two stained glass windows: one of Christ the Good Shepherd and the other depicting the scene we just heard in today's Gospel: Jesus welcoming the little children to come to him: "Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Mt 19:14). Fr. John was absolutely right in saying that to focus only on such scenes—the mild and gentle Jesus, even the warm and fuzzy one—without any reference to the cross is one-sided and terribly misleading. Even so, we can and ought learn something important from the Jesus presented to us in this particular Gospel. But what is it?

I'm pretty sure that lots of commentators have speculated on just what it is about children that made them, in Jesus' eyes, especially fit for the kingdom. There is probably no single correct answer. Some might emphasize the way in which children are generally aware of their inability to do many things for themselves: they often need to be carried because they aren't yet strong enough to walk a long distance; they need to be read to before they acquire the ability to read themselves; they aren't yet able to cook and so rely on others to prepare their meals. And this, Jesus may well be saying, is the way it is with all of us: we cannot enter the kingdom by our own power, so in a childlike way we have to recognize our need of God's initiating and supporting grace.

Others might emphasize the generally trusting nature of children, something that is in fact often a cause of great worry to parents since they realize that their child may well trust someone who actually wishes the child harm, and so the little ones get the message: "Don't talk to

strangers. Beware of people you don't know." That is, of course, good advice, but the childlikeness praised in the Gospel may well be saying that just as children tend to be trusting, so we adults should confidently trust in God's ever-present desire only for our good.

I would simply like to suggest another possible reason why Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven belongs to children and those who are in any way childlike. I suppose many or most of our mothers kept a baby book, in which she could recount various things about her child's early years. I sometimes look at mine, and on the occasion of my first Christmas, when I was only ten months old, Mother wrote that she had never seen anyone so fascinated by a Christmas tree. I would go up to it and, as far as I could reach, touch each and every bulb or ornament with my thumb, showing great delight in each one of them. What that so well illustrates is that for a child almost everything seems brand new, a source of endless fascination and joy. I'm sure that by my second or third Christmas I didn't show the very same degree of enthusiasm over the tree, and those of us who have lived through many Christmases may no longer pay much attention to the decorations at all. In a somewhat jaded way, we tend to manifest the attitude: "Been there, done that."

If this is so, that perhaps much of what Jesus recognized in little children was their instinctive ability to see and rejoice in something that may not have registered nearly as strongly on the consciousness of adults: what was really new and distinctive in his very being. It is instructive to look through the Bible and see the very frequent emphasis on newness: the Lord saying through the prophet Jeremiah, "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jer. 31:31); through the prophet Ezekiel, "I will give them a new heart and put a new spirit within them" (Ezek. 11:19); or through Isaiah, "See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? In the desert I am making a way, in the wasteland,

rivers” (Is. 43:19), all of this culminating in the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, where God, seated on the heavenly throne, proclaims: “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5).

There may be no easy way for us adults to overcome our very non-childlike tendency to ignore the newness that Jesus brought into the world and still brings into it each day, each hour, each minute. But if we take the time to ponder the Scriptures in a regular and faithful way, and if we also become more and more familiar with the lives of the saints and see how, in their own varying circumstances, they were able to live out the Gospel and proclaim the kingdom in ever-new ways by what they said and did, then perhaps we can regain something of that childlike delight in the freshness that ought always to pervade the life of any follower of the Lord Jesus.