

*And he came to Capernaum: and, being in the house, he asked them what it was that were arguing about among themselves. But they didn't answer him: for they had been arguing among themselves as to who was the greatest. And he sat down, and called the twelve, and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all." And he took a child, and set him among them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes a child in my name, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me, but also him who sent me.--MARK ix. 33-37.*

The account of this incident in Jesus' life given by St. Mark is more complete; but it may still be enriched and its lesson made clearer by considering St. Matthew's account.

*Truly I say to you, "Unless you are converted, and become like little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself as this little child, he is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such little child in my name welcomes me. But whoever offends one of these little ones that believes in me, it would be better for him that a millstone were hung about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depths of the sea."*

These passages record a lesson our Lord gave his disciples against ambition, against the desire to be better than others. I'm not writing about these words of our Lord with the goal of commenting on that particular lesson, but rather for the sake of a truth, a revelation about God, in which what he says reaches its pinnacle.

He took a little child – possibly a child of Peter, since Mark says that the incident happened at Capernaum, and "in the house" – a child most likely with some of the character traits of Peter, whose very faults were the faults of a childish nature. We might well expect the child of such a father to have the childlike characteristics essential to the lesson which I now want to set out.

For it must be said at the outset that there are children who are not childlike. One of the saddest and commonest sights in the world is the face of a child whose mind is so full of worldly wisdom that not only has the human childishness vanished, but so too has the divine childlikeness. For the *childlike* is the divine, and that very word helps me continue. But I need to hold off my climb until the final argument, so that I can deal with a possible difficulty. In turning us towards one of the greatest truths, this difficulty turns us away from the truth which the Lord had in view here.

The difficulty is this: Would we expect the *Son of man* to pick out the beautiful child, and leave the common child unnoticed? Why should we admire him for that? Don't even the bartenders do that? And don't our hearts revolt against the thought of it? Wouldn't the heart of a mother feel closest to the most sickly of her little ones? And will Christ as we believe him really choose according to outward beauty? Would he turn away from the child born and raised in sin, on whose face hunger and courage and love of praise have combined to make him deceptive and greedy? Would he really take into his arms instead the child of honest parents, such as Peter and his wife, who couldn't help but to look better than the others? That is not the one who came to seek and to save what was lost.

Let anyone who loves his brother answer this: In his highest moments of love to God, when he is closest to that ideal humanity where a man shall be a refuge from the wind, which child would he comfort? Wouldn't it be the evil-faced child, because he needed it most? Yes; in the name of God, yes. For isn't that the divine way? And who has read of the lost sheep, or the found prodigal son, and would not agree that it is the divine way?

No doubt, it will often *appear* otherwise, for the childlike child is easier to save than the other, and may well *come* first. But the rejoicing in heaven is greatest over the sheep that has wandered the farthest, possibly the one that was born in the wild and not in the fold. For such a prodigal, the elder brother in heaven prays like this: "Lord, think about my poor brother more than about me; for I know you, and am at rest in you. I am with you always."

So then, why do I think it's necessary to say that this child was probably Peter's child, or at the very least a child who looked childlike because it was childlike? No amount of evil can *be* the child. No amount of evil – not in the face, but rather in the habits – can make it stop being a child, or annihilate the divine idea of childhood which moved in the heart of God when he made that child after his own image. It's the essence of which God speaks, the reality by which he judges, the eternity of which he is the God.

I grant this. And if the reason our Lord took the child in his arms was to teach love to our neighbour, or love to humanity, then the ugliest child would perhaps have best served his purpose. Clearly, the man who welcomes the repulsive child, simply because he is the child of God, simply because the child is his own brother, will of course welcome the Father. Whoever gives a cup of cold water to a little one refreshes the heart of the Father. To do as God does, is to welcome God; to do something for one of his children is to welcome the Father. This means that any human being at all, especially if outcast and ugly, would do as well as a child for the goal of showing this love of God. Therefore, something more is probably intended here. We'll find that the lesson lies not in the *humanity* of the child, but in the *childhood* of the child.

Again, if the disciples could have seen that the essence of childhood was intended, and not a blurred and damaged childhood, then the most selfish child might have done just as well. But such a child could have done no better than the one presented here, in whom we suppose that the true childhood is more clearly seen. But when the child was used set forward as a picture of the truth that lay in his childhood (so that the eyes and ears could be channels to the heart), it was essential that the child should be childlike. It made no difference whether the child was beautiful. It made all the difference that the qualities which awake in our hearts the love we have for childhood – the perception of childhood – would at the very least be seen in the face of the *chosen example*.

Consider such an unchildlike child as we sometimes see: a rich child, perhaps of royalty, or on the other hand perhaps a homeless child clothed in rags. Would such a child have been useful for our Lord's purpose, since he said that his hearers must become like this child? Would such a child have been useful when the lesson he made was that of the divine nature of the child, meaning childlikeness? Wouldn't there have been a discord between the child and our Lord's word? A contrast which would be ridiculous were it not so horrifying? And wouldn't it have been particularly strange given that he drew attention to the individuality of the child by saying "this little child", "a child such as this", and "these little ones who believe in me"? Even the feelings of compassion and love that would arise in a good heart would have turned that heart away from the lesson our Lord intended to give.

And now I would like to show more fully that the lesson indeed lay not in the humanity of the child but in the childhood of the child. The disciples had been arguing over who should be the greatest, and the Lord wanted to show them that such arguments had nothing to do with the way things were in his kingdom. So, he took a child as an example of his subjects, and set him before them. The child was presented as a subject of the kingdom not because of his humanity, but because of his childhood. It was not to show how big the kingdom was, but what kind of kingdom it was. He

told them they could not enter into the kingdom except by becoming little children – by humbling themselves. For where childlikeness was the one essential requirement, the idea of ruling was excluded.

From that point onwards, it was not about who should rule, but rather who should serve; it was not about who would look down on his fellow humans from the heights of authority – even sacred authority – but rather who should look up and honour humanity, and serve it, so that humanity itself might eventually be persuaded of its own honour as a temple of the living God. It was to impress this lesson upon them that he showed them the child. Therefore, I repeat, the point of the lesson was in the *childhood* of the child.

But now I approach the crux of what I'm saying. For this lesson led to the announcement of an even higher truth, upon which the lesson was based, and from which the lesson arose. Man is not required to do anything that is not first in God. We are required to be perfect simply because God is perfect. And the reason that this child is chosen and put before them in the gospel is this: So that God may be revealed to all human souls, and so they may be saved by knowing him and becoming like him. It is not the one who embraces the childhood of the child out of love for humanity, or even love to God as the Father of it, who has a share in the meaning and blessing of the passage. It's the one who, in giving the cup of water or the comfort, embraces the childish humanity of the child. It's the recognition that the childhood is divine which will show the disciple how pointless it is to strive after place of honour in the great kingdom.

For it is *in my name*. This means *as representing me*, and therefore, *as being like me*. Our Lord could not commission anyone to be welcomed in his name who could not more or less represent him; for then there would be falsehood and nonsense. And further, he had just been telling the disciples that they must become like this child. Now, when he tells them to welcome *such* a little child in his name, it surely implies something in common between them all; something which the child and Jesus have in common; something which the child and the disciples have in common. What else can that be but the spiritual childhood?

*In my name* does not mean *because I desire it*. For any one person who could receive the vital truth of his character as contained in the words, there would definitely be ten thousand people who would obey a statement of the Lord's will, even under suffering. But our Lord doesn't want obedience alone, but obedience to the *truth*, that is, to the Light of the World, which is truth seen and known.

If we grasp the full meaning – which alone will harmonise the passage and make it complete – then *in my name* involves a revelation from resemblance, a revelation from suitability to represent and reveal. He who welcomes a child, then, in the name of Jesus, does so understanding what it is that the child and Jesus have in common. He must see not just the ideal child in the child he welcomes – that reality of beauty which is true childhood – but must perceive that the child is like Jesus, or rather, that the Lord is like the child. He must see that the Lord may be welcomed, and is welcomed, by every heart childlike enough to welcome a child because of his childness.

Mind you, I'm not saying that only those who realise they're doing this are able to share in the blessing. But there is a special sense of blessing which belongs to the act of welcoming a child as the visible likeness of the Lord himself. For the blessing is the perception of the truth – the blessing is the truth itself, the God-known truth – that the Lord has the heart of a child. The man

who perceives this knows in himself that he is blessed – blessed because the Lord has the heart of a child.

But the argument as to the meaning of our Lord's words, *in my name*, is not complete, until we follow our Lord's statement to its second and higher stage: "He who welcomes me, welcomes him who sent me." We can rightly assume that the connection between the first and second link of the chain will probably be the same connection as between the second and third links. I'm not saying it absolutely must be the case, for my goal is not to be logically certain. My goal is to show the idea to which I'm coming closer by my progression, rather than by proof. For if someone sees it but cannot receive it, if it doesn't appear true to him, there would not only be little use in convincing him with logic, but I'm sure that he could easily suggest other possible connections in the chain. I doubt, though, that any others are quite as symmetrical.

So, what is the connection between the second and the third links? How is it that he who welcomes the Son also welcomes the Father? It's because the Son is as the Father, and he whose heart can see the essence of Christ, also has the essence of the Father. That is, he recognises it, and can thereby worship the Father as such.

Moving on, what is the connection between the first and second links? I think it's the same. "He who sees the essence of this child – the pure childhood – also sees that which is the essence of me", which is grace and truth, or in a single word, childlikeness. It does not follow that the essence of the child is perfect as is the essence of the Lord, but it certainly is the same kind. And therefore, that which is seen in the child shows us that which is in Jesus.

All this means that to welcome a child in the name of Jesus is to welcome Jesus; to welcome Jesus is to welcome God; therefore, to welcome the child is to welcome God himself.

I can show that this is the feeling of the words, and the feeling in the heart of our Lord when he spoke them, from another golden thread that can be traced through the shining web of his golden words.

What is the kingdom of Christ? A rule of love and truth; a rule of service. The king is the chief servant in it. "The kings of the earth lord it over their subjects: it shall not be the same among you." "The Son of Man came to serve." "My Father is working now, and I too am working."

The great Workman is the great King, working for his own. Therefore, the one who would be greatest among them, and come closest to the King himself, must be the servant of all. It is *like king like subject* in the kingdom of heaven. There is no rule of force, as in one kind over a different kind. It is the rule of *kind*, of *nature*, of the deepest nature – *of God*.

If, in order to enter his kingdom, we must become children, then the spirit of children must be its overriding spirit throughout, from the lowly subject to the lowliest king. The lesson added by St. Luke to the presentation of the child is this: "For he who is least among you, that same person will be great." And St. Matthew says: "Whoever humbles himself as this little child, that same person is greatest in the kingdom of heaven." This explains the sign which passes between king and subject. The subject kneels in honour to the kings of the earth; the heavenly king takes his subject in his arms. This is the sign of the kingdom between them. This is the all-encompassing relationship of the kingdom.

To take a quick look back, then...

To welcome the child because God welcomes it, or because of its humanity, is one thing. To welcome it because it is like God, or for its childhood, is quite another. The former will do little to destroy ambition. On its own, it might actually argue for a wider scope to ambition, since it has in mind all men. But the latter strikes at the very root of the desire to be better than others. The instant that service is done for the honour, and not for the sake of the service, the doer is outside the kingdom. But when we welcome the child in the name of Christ, the very childhood that we welcome to our arms is humanity itself. We love its humanity in its childhood, for childhood is the deepest heart of humanity – its divine heart – and so in the name of the child we receive all humanity. And so, even though the lesson is not about humanity, but about childhood, it has application to the human race, and we receive our race with wider arms and deeper heart. There is, then, no other lesson lost by understanding this; no heartlessness shown in insisting that the child was a lovable child; a childlike child.

If there is indeed a picture in heaven of that wonderful teaching, no doubt we will see represented in it a faint childhood shining from the faces of that whole group of disciples. In the centre is the Son of God with a child in his arms. The childhood, even though faint in the faces of men, must be shining perfectly clear in the face of the child. But in the face of the Lord himself, the childhood will be triumphant – all his wisdom and all his truth will be showing that radiant contentment of faith in his father. Truly, O Lord, this childhood is life. Truly, O Lord, when your tenderness has made the world great, then, as children like you, all men will smile in the face of the great God.

But now to move on to that highest point of this teaching of our Lord: “He who welcomes me welcomes him who sent me.” To welcome a child in the name of God is to welcome God himself. How do we welcome him? As only he can be welcomed – by knowing him as he is. To know him is to have him in us. And so that we may know him, let’s now welcome this revelation of him, in the words of our Lord himself. Here is the argument of most importance based on the teaching of our master in the words before us.

God is represented in Jesus, because God is like Jesus. Jesus is represented in the child, because Jesus is like the child. Therefore, God is represented in the child, because God is like the child. God is childlike. The welcoming of God in the child lies in seeing this fact clearly and truly.

Now that I’ve reached this point, I have nothing more to do with the argument. For if the Lord did indeed mean this – that is, if this is a truth – then he who is able to receive it will receive it; he who has ears to hear will hear it. For our Lord’s arguments are for the presentation of the truth, and the truth carries its own conviction to him who is able to receive it.

But the word of someone who has seen this truth might help the emergence of a similar understanding in those who keep their faces turned towards the east and its sunrise. Men may have eyes, and seeing only slightly, may want to see more. Therefore, let’s ponder a little on the idea itself, and see whether it will come out and commend itself to the spirit which searches the deep things of God. For although the true heart may at first be shocked at the truth, as Peter was shocked when he said “That’s not like you, Lord!”, it will, after a while, receive it and rejoice in it.

Let me ask then: Do you believe in the Incarnation? And if you do, let me ask further: “Was Jesus ever less divine than God? I will answer for you: Never. He was lower, but never less divine. Wasn’t he a child then? You answer “Yes, but not like other children.” I ask, “Didn’t he look like

other children?" If he looked like them and was not like them, the whole thing was a deception, a masquerade at best. I say he was a child, whatever else he might be. God is man, and yet infinitely more. Our Lord became flesh, but did not *become* man. He took on himself the form of man: he was a man already. And he was, and is, and forever will be, divinely childlike. He could never have been a child if he ever stopped being a child, for in him dwelt only eternity. Childhood belongs to the divine nature.

Obedience, then, is as divine as Will; Service is as divine as Rule. How? Because they are the same in their nature. They are both a doing of the truth. The love in them is the same. The Fatherhood and the Sonship are the same, except that the Fatherhood looks down lovingly, and the Sonship looks up lovingly. Love is all. And God is all in all. He is always seeking to get down to us – to be the divine man to us. And we are always saying: "That's not like you, Lord!"

In our unbelief, we think too much about the divine dignity – a dignity of which he is too grand to think. More pleasing to God is the audacity of Job. Rushing into God's presence, and kicking in the door, like a troubled child – possibly angry but still faithful – he calls aloud into the ear of him whose perfect Fatherhood he hasn't yet learned: "Am I a sea or a whale, that you watch over me?"

Let's dare, then, to climb the height of divine truth to which this saying of our Lord would lead us.

Doesn't it lead us to this: that the devotion of God to his creatures is perfect? That he does not think about himself but about them? That he wants nothing for himself, but finds his blessedness in the sharing of his blessedness?

Ah! It is a terrible glory. Will it also be a lonely glory? We will draw near with our human response, our abandonment of self in the faith of Jesus. He gives himself to us – will we not give ourselves to him? Will we not give ourselves to each other whom he loves?

For when is the child the ideal child in our eyes and hearts? Isn't it when with a gentle hand he takes his father by the beard, and turns that father's face up to his brothers and sisters to kiss? Isn't it when even the lovely selfishness of love-seeking has disappeared, and the heart is completely taken up with loving?

This, then, is how God is like the child: he is simply and altogether our friend and our father – but more than friend, father and mother – our infinite love-perfect God. Although he is grand and strong – beyond all that human imagination can conceive – he is delicate beyond all that human tenderness can imagine between husband and wife, and homely beyond all that the human heart can imagine of father or mother.

He does not have two thoughts about us. With him, everything is simplicity of purpose and meaning and effort and goal – namely, that we should be as he is, that we should think the same thoughts, mean the same things, and have the same blessedness. It is so plain that anyone may see it; everyone ought to see it, and everyone will one day see it. It will certainly happen. He is completely true and good to us, and nothing will stop his will.

How terribly the theologians have misrepresented God by focussing attention on the low and showy humanities, rather than the lofty and simple humanities! Nearly all of them represent him as a great King on a grand throne, thinking how grand he is, and making his reason for existence

and the goal of his universe to maintain his glory, wielding the bolts of a Jupiter against those who blaspheme his name. They would not admit this; but take what they say to its natural conclusion, and it amounts to the same thing.

Brothers, have you found our king? There he is: kissing little children and saying they are like God. There he is at a table with the head of a fisherman nestled in to him – and heavy enough at heart that even he, the disciple Jesus loves – still cannot understand him well. The simplest peasant who loves his children and his sheep is a picture – not a truer, for the other is false – but a true picture of our God beside that monstrosity of a monarch.

The God who is always showing himself in the changing modes of nature, who takes millions of years to form a soul that will understand him and be blessed, who never needs to hurry and never is in a hurry, who welcomes the simplest thought of truth or beauty as a return of the seed he has sown on the old plowed grounds of eternity, who rejoices when someone responds to the age-long cry of his wisdom in the streets, the God of music, of painting, of building, the Lord of Hosts, the God of mountains and oceans, whose laws go out from one unseen point of wisdom, and then return without any loss, the God of history working in time through Christianity – this God is the God of little children, and he alone can be perfectly simple and devoted. The deepest, purest love of a woman has its source in him. Our longing desires can no more use up the full treasures of the Godhead, than our imagination can comprehend their fullness. No thought of him, no joy in him, no hope in him of one of his creatures can escape his sight. And as long as one of them remains unsatisfied, he is not Lord over all.

Therefore, with angels and archangels, with the spirits of the righteous made perfect, with the little children of the kingdom, and even with the Lord himself, and for all those who do not know him, we praise and magnify and glorify his name in itself, saying *Our Father*.

We do not draw back thinking we are unworthy, nor even thinking that we are hard-hearted and don't care for goodness. For it is his childlikeness which makes him our God and Father. The perfection of his relationship to us swallows up all our imperfections, all our defects, all our evils. For our childhood is born of his fatherhood. The man who lives with absolute dryness of feeling and desire, without any feeling of life or joy, with the weight of sinful thoughts, failures, neglects and wandering forgetfulness, and can still come to God and say to him "You are my refuge, because you are my home" – that man is perfect in faith.

Such a faith will not lead to arrogance. The man who can pray such a prayer will know better than others, these things: that God will not be mocked, that God is not a man that he should change his mind, that tears and long-winded prayers will not move him to break one of his laws, that for God to give a man something which was not in harmony with his laws of truth and righteousness – just because he asked for it – would be to cast him into the outer darkness. And he knows that the childlike and unruffled God will not let any man leave that prison until he has paid the last penny.

And even if he forgets this, the God to whom he belongs will not forget it and will not forget him. Life is not a series of accidents with a few providential orderings thrown in here and there to bolster a failing belief, but rather one long providence of God.

And the man will not have lived long before life itself reminds him of this. It may be through the agony of soul which he has forgotten. When he prays for comfort, the answer may come in dread and terror and the turning away of the Father's face. For love will, for the sake of love itself, turn

its face away from whatever is not lovely. And the man will have to read the awful and glorious words – written on the dark wall of his imprisoned conscience – *Our God is a consuming fire*.

THE END

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