

The Church is in child-time – first communion/confirmation...

Jesus is the eternal desire of God - total love - made flesh. He is the one who, in his divinity brings this invitation to us, and in his humanity is the total acceptance. *Jesus is the yes of God to creation, and the yes of creation to God* - as St. Paul tells us - 2Cor.1.20. Life moves from immature childhood into adolescence, on into adulthood, and then our faith tells us, on further *into mature childhood - unless you become as children you will not enter the kingdom.* - Mt.18.3.

Nature and nurture can leave me with a faulty image of myself. As we have seen, birth - discovering for the first time that I am a separate individual - is harrowing and frightening. So too is the kind of nurture culture recommends.

Whatever goodness is, it seems to be outside me, in my living up to the expectations of others of me - i.e. unless there is the necessary balance in place, called family, friendship and a whole variety of intimacies that let me know in so many wonderful ways, that I am good simply because I'm me.

There is a wounded child in all of us - a child whose hopes, dreams and expectations have always been a guiding light. The child knows instinctively where it is from, and reaches out in trust to where it knows love and security are. This is what Jesus is referring to with: *unless you become as little children...*

The immature child instinctively wants to believe, to trust, to accept - mature childhood is freely choosing to live by such faith, well-founded, rather than by rational logic. There is something eternal about childhood. It isn't something we live through for 12 years or so and then leave behind. A new-born baby brings something new about God into our world, simply in being itself - able to be aware, to gaze, trust to enjoy.

This innocence tends to be lost - even stolen - during life, though it is never entirely missing. It holds my spiritual DNA, how I can be with God as nobody else ever can, I can make God present as no one else can, God doesn't make copies; and in as much as I have access to this, it shapes all my relationships, making me uniquely me.

The child does not *acquire* adulthood. Maturation is an unfolding of something already present - as the oak in the acorn. We don't lose our childhood, but at some stage re-discover it; when I can name it and welcome it. Human growth is not moving away from childhood values, but into a shape of life that allows them to flourish fully.

We are in a culture guilty of the neglect and abuse of children; a culture unaware that when God became fully present in Jesus, that the physical presence in which God chose to be with us, is as a helpless baby clinging to a human breast - someone needing love, is how God comes to us. Jesus is the origin of all life [*the way, truth and life*], this presence of God is there wherever love is in need. God came into creation, deliberately, giving us someone to love, someone needing care - as St. John wrote: *what we have seen, touched and held in our hands... and again as often as you did it to these the least, you did it to me.*

We all began life like that - and we continue life like that - whether we own it or not. The child is not ego-driven, but drawn forward by wonder, attracted by transparency and fun. Part of our maturation is not simply to recognise our common need for this, but to accept the responsibility for allowing it to happen by incarnating such values. How we live everyday should allow us to qualify for what Henri Nouwen described as being at home: *home is where I am loved by people who don't have to be impressed by me.*

I believe in that child within me; I believe that God is born anew in every birth; I also believe this child is damaged, and the evidence for this is my own hesitancy, fearfulness in my loving and relating - or my inability to relate sensitively. I believe my salvation rests with setting my inner child free to flourish. To do this I believe that *I need to grow younger as I grow older.* Augustine got it so right when he tells us that *no one is younger than God.*

The first necessary step is to recover the giftedness the child has to gaze. A baby doesn't watch or look, it simply gazes - i.e. open to whatever is there. In wide-eyed wonder the infant accepts, uncritically. This is the perfect answer to the God who delights in total giving. What was thus instinctive in me as a baby, now misplaced along the way, I need to recover so that gazing becomes the directly willed purpose of my life, the gazing that means welcome.

I need to be more aware of *the now* of my life... notice what is going on in my head, in my body, let them talk to me - my body cannot lie. I can lie, but my body cannot, I might ignore the signs whether through being too busy, or through fear... I need to let it talk to me and tell me what is what. Only then will I start to realise that my life is handicapped, limited by my need to make comparisons - what if...

What is the anxiety that robs me of being in charge of me? The miracle of life is not to be able to walk on water, but to walk consciously on sister mother earth. Why do I miss so much of reality? Why am I reluctant to live more in the now; instead of worrying about tomorrow, or being annoyed about yesterday?

No one can harm me if I live the now of life fully... the place to meet God, who describes self as I AM. Learn from the infant I have somehow left behind - born to trust, ready to trust, able to be free because trust is well-founded in the tangible love of parents and siblings.

This is not only a passive experience - one of the most precious gifts a child gives to the adult is to accept the adult as they are. A truly God-like quality. Tired people work hard at being good - and strive even harder to be better. *I cannot be good*, I am overtaken by goodness all around me, gently inviting me to trust, and realise that I am also a part of this universal goodness; most especially that fidelity to now, opens up into a life without ending - since God is I AM.

St. Francis saw so much goodness all around him, because he went looking for it. Why has the whole world seemingly gone after him? He is no orator, no miracle-worker, not particularly handsome. Because his shape of life, which so many find attractive, also leaves you with the conviction - *I can do that.* I can indeed. But do I? What am I looking for when I gaze? Nothing. Simply gazing

without intent, letting what is real come into me without filtering. To gaze is to allow all to come to me - a very different experience from looking/watching.

But everything seen is by no means always positive; so, how can I absorb the negative in a healing way? Certainly not by a stoical grin and bear it rationalising of feelings. I need to sit with whatever is this very real feeling in a neutral and non-judgmental way - to try to savour and experience it as it is. When the negatives come leaping at me from within the experience, I don't have to let them in.

This is by no means comfortable, but it does give life a chance to be my teacher - to turn away from the pain too quickly could remove me from the birth pangs of something new and never seen before. What St. Francis learned from the Incarnation was *to see how opposites can be reconciled* - looking at Christ hanging between good and bad on Calvary, the father and sons [*Prodigal*], the good of my dreams and the pain of now.

No one promised me that my life would be sunshine and roses all the time, or that it would be fair. And I am counselled by the Gospel that so precious are the good things of life that I should refrain from spending time uprooting the weeds lest I damage the good and tender shoots. It isn't easy to live like that, to have to live with feelings of being irrelevant, of being abused, taken for granted, over-looked yet again...

There is no virtue in grinning and bearing it. Resisting the fight/flight syndrome, and staying with it in a neutral way helps me dismantle my own false self. In Deuteronomy we are counselled - *precisely because you know from experience what it feels like... never knowingly do this to anyone else*. Pain like this is simply the other side of what love is all about.

At the end of it all, it is me, exactly as I am, who God loves - to walk away from now, for whatever reason, is to be other than myself, to remove myself from feeling the warmth of God's love. Running away from fear is fear, just as running from pain is painful. Life is not about achieving happiness now, or how to get rid of pain - it is about living all of it to the full, relishing it so much as to absorb the hurt instead of redistributing it.

Why did the Prodigal leave home? He isn't the first youngster to leave home recorded in the Gospel - we know why Jesus left home [*as a child*] - *to be about my Father's business*. By contrast, this young man wants to get away from his father. He wanted his share of the family fortune, and he wanted it now. The law stated that he is entitled to his share on his father's death - his sin is treating his father as though he were already dead.

In telling this parable Jesus identifies for us what is the real root of sin. We are accustomed to using laundry lists of sins - *stealing, lying, abusing, fornication, adultery...* these are not so much sins as the consequences of sin - why did I do all these things? Here is an answer to that question - he values the things he gets from his father more than he values his father - over the warmth, companionship and belonging - the gifts over the giver. It is right to enjoy and value gifts - here it is a question of how he does it - treating his father as though he is already dead.

Sin is not wanting bad things but wanting smaller instead of greater - and his consequent weariness and self-disgust are the consequences. He opts to live in a different kind of community - his home is the community where belonging is the powerful cement - where people don't have to be impressed by me to love me. He chooses self-interest over self-giving... doing his own thing over being there for others. He opts to live where everything is either owed or forbidden. It is refusing to live his life as others need it, not just as he sees it.

Eventually, he experiences the effects of choosing something too small - depressed, can't cope. His sin is not squandering and wasting his inheritance, *his sin is leaving home for the wrong reason*. He finds an employer who uses him to feed pigs - who values the pigs over him [*they get good food he gets scraps*].

His conversion is very instructive: he makes up his mind to eat humble pie, to go home and live as a servant - *and be better off than this*. Indeed, his motivation is still self-centred. Here we have the paradox; we are told that Jesus came to serve, not to be served - and yet here, we see that serving is not enough. His father will have none of it, he belongs as an adult child, a child of the home no matter how young or old.

The message: there is no way to build a human society - be it parish, village, church or state - unless it is more than human. It is never enough to be obedient to what is reasonable in relating [*service*]. Forgiveness is not just the healing of our weakness, it is, literally experiencing being welcomed home... for no other reason than I am me. This is the eternal childhood - experiencing being where I belong. When his older brother hears all this he is angry, to put it mildly. For him, feasting and celebrating have to be earned - life is a meritocracy. He too is guilty of the same sin - valuing the gifts more than the giver.

The total self-giving of our God [*that helpless child*] is both the source of virtue and the guarantee of forgiveness - St. Francis said: *there is no one whatsoever who will not receive your forgiveness if only he will look you in the eye*. We make merry and rejoice at times like Christmas and special family days, not because we are particularly virtuous, not because we are sinners - we are *forgiven* sinners - we were lost and could not cope, but we have been found - welcomed home. *Simply to live is to be holy*, and to be aware of this enough to intend it, is pure adoration. Not a special awareness about a special happening, but any awareness about any part of creation is an invitation to true *worship* [worship].

As I began my life as one with my mother in the womb - I moved on to receive the gift of knowing me to be separate at birth - equal but not the same - as are the Persons of the Trinity. Though I am born in moving away from the original intimacy of the womb in order to become that intimacy... just so, my life is God's waiting time... waiting for as long as it takes, for me who was created without my consent, to say yes please to becoming part of full living - and to come home with my consent.

God is nowhere else than now. Like the infant child, I need to relish my now - to be where God is waiting for me - me living my life to the full. And so we move - from the womb to infancy, from infancy to childhood, onto adolescence and adulthood - and then, please God, onto mature childhood - able to receive all by

letting all be itself, and it all happens in the NOW of my life - *unless you become as little children* - Mt.18.3. you will not know the Kingdom.

All we have to do is to believe enough for it to become the focus of life: when God came into our world as a baby; it's as if the angel's message was so astoundingly profound: *Don't be afraid, its only me, and I love you.*

As the Gospel begins - so does it end, and we do well to listen to what is being said. It is tempting and even salutary at times to indulge in the warm feelings of the Christmas story, but contained there is the full message, to be spelled out so clearly through the vision of the Transfiguration and elsewhere. *He came to his own, and his own would not receive him.* Perhaps we should say his own could not receive him as he is, and since he cannot be other than who he is, he was rejected.

Jesus tells us that to be a follower we must deny ourselves. He's talking about much more than the kind of self-control or restraint we try to exercise during Lent. He is asking us to see that reliance on sheer human goodness on its own is not enough to win through. He is not saying there is no value in anything - he is revealing and making present for all of us, a love that goes deeper than any form of human loving. If I can face the fact that I'm going to fail - recognise what death means and its impact - then I will be in touch with life way beyond anything we normally mean by life.

But why presume that I will fail? Being really human means, because of the option we made not to obey, not to follow, now we are left in the kind of muddle and mess that Jesus was in. This is what God can only be like in our distorted world because of sin. He didn't stand a chance to be fully human in our environment.

Love has to fail in a world opting for death, because to live so that others may enjoy the freedom necessary to live well, actually encourages the world to despise, reject, hate and kill you. Original Sin is not something our first parents did and we are picking up the tab. Original sin happens to each one of us by our being born like Jesus, into a distorted and dislocated world, whose priorities are very different. So much so, that when love actually arrived in person, we had to kill him. As St. Paul writes: *he was made sin [not to sin] for us.* - 2Cor.5.21

The Good News is: It doesn't have to be like that - Jesus shows that genuinely good human living is made to receive the Love that is God - the love that will suffer wherever there is evil, even though death will never overcome it, as the Resurrection shows. To receive that gift means letting go of our self-sufficiency - deny self - quite literally in order to live by that passionate way which actually changes me - from living my life as I want it - to living it as you need it.

The world will only be changed into a world welcoming Love by the way it is lived-in by anyone accepting his way of being a human being. This is what Baptism is all about. Our faith rests firmly within the Resurrection, Jesus is Risen, as he promised. But where is the evidence of it today? There is more than enough pain and heartache to justify scepticism. We have suffered unfairly and caused others to suffer unfairly - we have been sinned against, but we are also sinners.

In no way does Jesus compromise with evil. He always sought to remove evil, as must anyone who follows. For a start: *wherever you see goodness, celebrate it; wherever you see goodness damaged, repair it; wherever you see goodness is missing, bring it with you* - is how St. Bonaventure pictures the life of the Risen Christ in his Body [Church] today. To make the Lord of eternity present in today's world is to live within it abundantly, just as it is; to set free all who long for such abundance from whatever impedes them from doing so. It means being real.

How can we all, who come from so many diverse cultures and histories, make sure we appreciate what is real, all the while being different, yet not divided? How can we, in this part of creation, ensure that we value each person as a subject, never an object? That we cherish the primacy of persons over things? We begin by making sure that *systems, rules and the like, always serve life*, not the other way round. Structures are crucial and necessary, but always in the service of something higher.

Scaffolding is necessary to build a house; and its purpose is to allow what is being shaped within it to become free standing, able to stand on its own without needing the scaffolding. So too, I needed the scaffolding of my parents' guidance to teach me the basic laws of love, affection, courtesy and good manners. Hopefully, by now I have interiorised these values, made them my own, part of my own living instinct.

Within the vastness of Creation, so many millions of different parts, there is a grouping that is different, unlike the rest of creation. This grouping is able to be self-aware; can appreciate what is more than itself; is able to wonder, to foster, to create and recreate. It is that part of creation made able to receive awareness of what Creation is, where it is from and where it is going; all the time aware of the invitation to become freely, a living enthusiast for what reality is all about. Genesis says it: *whatever name the man called it, that is the name by which it is known* - 2.19. Our-God given task is to name Creation for God in such fashion that it can become what God intended.

As we have seen, to be Christ-like is to be oneself, as Christ made Abba known by being himself, his Father's Son, so we, as adopted children of Abba are called to a) to make Abba known precisely by being who we are meant to be: *God is praised when we are fully alive* [St. Irenaeus].; and b) to enable the rest of Creation to do likewise, to be itself precisely by the way it is lived-in with this specific purpose. We are to embrace God's creative words as our *modus vivendi* - let it be. This to the extent that the very dust of this earth has become the body of God.