

Jesus and the angels:

His conception; birth; temptation; agony in the garden;

His resurrection and ascension.

And his own teaching.

There is nothing sentimental or kitsch about what he says.

Let's hear some of his teaching today:

**At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'**

What we're about to hear comes in response

To the disciples' question: a question about *status*.

We will hear that Jesus brings up *the angels*

In response to this question about status,

But he will take us on a journey of understanding.

Listen, first, to what he does: **He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'**

Note: Before words, actions: putting the child in their midst.

Then he gives his teaching.

One way to think about this: Children know they are not in charge,

That they are part of something much bigger than themselves.

They *receive* their place in the family,

And they learn to live in harmony with their siblings

Under the loving guidance of their mother and father.

But Jesus takes this reality

And thinks about it from the point of view of adults:

Especially of adults who are in positions of authority,

Like his chosen disciples,

Especially disciples who are concerned about status.

Listen to what he says: **Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.**

From his teaching we know that Jesus was well aware

Of status games in the human community,

And that we naturally want to make connections  
With high status people,  
So that we ourselves will grow in status.  
Now as I read the Gospels  
Jesus both recognises the *legitimacy* of our need for status,  
And *encourages* us to seek it,  
*But not according to the norms of this world.*

In worldly terms welcoming a child does not bring status:  
Seen from the point of view of money or connections,  
They have nothing to offer.  
But Jesus says that welcoming a child in his name,  
Means welcoming *him*, with all the status affirmation that this brings.

Note here, by the way, Jesus' use of the word 'one'.  
It comes up throughout the reading.  
*Greatness is not about numbers,*  
For welcoming even *one* such child means welcoming Jesus.

I said that children have nothing to offer,  
Seen from the point of view of money or connections.  
But there is a darker reality at work in this world,  
Where those with authority and power,  
Including religious authority and power,  
Can welcome children to abuse them,  
Including to sexual abuse them.

It appears that Jesus now starts to give his disciples  
Who are concerned about status in God's kingdom,  
Dire warnings about the abuse of children,  
And, by extension, the abuse of all those who are vulnerable  
And open to exploitation.

Listen to what Jesus says: **'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling-blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling-block comes!'**

A stumbling block: something that causes them to stumble and fall

As they are walking the path of faith.

Note how St Paul uses this language, too.

Think about what can happen if a child is abused

By someone in religious authority:

What happens to their trust in God?

Jesus gives his disciples the strongest warnings in this regard,

And he goes on to make his warning even more emphatic.

Listen to what he says: **'If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.'**

Does this language sound familiar?

It's the same sort of language that Jesus uses

In the Sermon on the Mount, where he warns his disciples

About sexual sin, and especially about adultery.

Here he applies it to how children can be abused,

Which makes me think that he has in mind especially

The sexual abuse of children.

Notice, by the way, that he gives hell fire warnings here:

Warnings that he does not give to the crowds,

But to his own disciples out of love and care for them.

It's at this point that Jesus brings in, we might think unexpectedly,

The angels.

Listen to what he says: **'Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.'**

What's going on here?

Jesus talks about the angels that see the Father's face.

That is, the front-rank angels,

*Those with status in the kingdom of heaven.*

Think perhaps about the royal funeral,

And who was closest to the coffin of the Queen.

Jesus warns his disciples,

Who are concerned about status in God's kingdom,

To be careful not to despise the little ones,  
Who seem to offer no advantage in terms of worldly status.  
He says that they have great status in God's kingdom,  
They are so great that the front-rank angels serve them.

Jesus then wraps up his response to his disciples' question  
About greatness in God's kingdom,  
By telling the parable of the lost sheep.  
Do you remember that we recently heard this in Luke's Gospel,  
In response to the grumbling of the scribes and pharisees,  
As they saw sinners and tax collectors drawing near to Jesus  
To listen to him.  
Here Jesus uses the same parable with a different audience,  
And in response to a different reality.

Listen to what he says: **What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.**

Again, Jesus emphasises the significance of the individual,  
And the fact that in the kingdom of heaven,  
Even the seemingly most insignificant,  
Even the little ones, *even little children*,  
Are of great value to the Father.

You may sometimes look at your place in this world,  
And feel that you are insignificant, or even valueless.  
But look to your Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus:  
He came to seek and save you, and to bring you home to God,  
So that you may, together with all God's holy ones,  
Together with angels and archangels,  
Be drawn into the community of love that is our Triune God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
In Jesus' name. Amen.