

## Sermon for Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> September 2020

Trinity 13

Christ Church North Adelaide



While I am in parish ministry, I always wear a clerical collar and a cross. This identifies me as a priest in the church of God and it can be very useful. Sometimes I have been asked to give God's blessing to a shop, or I have been asked to pray for someone. It also helps when I am visiting. The collar identifies me and people know what to expect of me when I knock on their door.

However, there have been times when I have been sworn at and accused of being a paedophile. The revelations of sexual abuse in the church and in church schools have done great harm to the church.

As a result the church has taken its responsibilities towards children very seriously and now every minister and church worker must obtain clearance to do the work they are doing and must undergo regular training to keep them up to date.

This is a really good thing to do because Jesus had a particular care for young people and we take his words seriously. "Take care," he said, "that you do not despise one of these little ones." The word "despise" means to look down on someone as if they were not worth noticing. To despise someone is to ignore them, to treat them as they do not exist, to treat them as unimportant. Jesus points out that the little ones are under God's watchful eye.



Little ones are so important to God that their guardian angels have instant access to God – their angels continually see the face of God. God's concern is like the concern of a shepherd who will risk everything to find a lost sheep.



The shepherd notices that a little one is missing, and because they are so important, rushes off to look for them, leaving the other ninety nine on the hillside. The story tells us that God will not overlook or forget or lose even the smallest of the little ones. For this reason the church has developed a zero tolerance attitude towards the abuse of young people in any way. The church has made some dreadful mistakes in the past, and clergy and people in charge of little ones have broken their trust.

So, inspired by Jesus' words, the church acknowledges the wrong that has been done and resolves that we will do our best to make sure that it will never happen again. This process is called repentance. Repentance is another way of saying that we learn from our mistakes and do not repeat them.

There is one more point to be made from this first paragraph of the gospel. Little ones does not only mean children. As we see in the letters of Peter and John, little ones means people who are learning to be children of God, those whose faith is just beginning to grow and flourish. How important it is for those people to be nourished and supported by the faith community. When someone comes into our congregation for the first time, we should greet them as honoured guests. It would be very rude of us to ignore them, to look down on them because they can't find their place in the prayer book and don't know the tunes of the hymns.

Jesus would say, do not despise these little ones; for I tell you, their angels have brought them here and God has brought them here so that the kingdom of heaven may be proclaimed.

It is an awesome responsibility God has given to us, to welcome strangers, to strengthen the fainthearted, to support the weak; to help the afflicted and to honour everyone.



However, all humans make mistakes, all humans are sinners and all, from time to time do something really stupid and selfish and cause offence against someone. Some things are best dealt with by the police and other civil authorities. The church cannot deal with serious crimes against people, their property, or their civil rights.

However, where we can, we are to deal mercifully. The Gospel gives a process of dealing with offences against its own community. If two cannot be reconciled, they are to call witnesses, and if there is still no reconciliation, it may be necessary for someone to leave the community. This is a process which can bind up the wounds in the community and lead to healing. It is also a process which may lead to the loosening of the ties of friendship.

Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

This means that whatever we do on earth will have results in heaven. If we despise someone, we are telling them that they are not worthy to enter the kingdom of heaven. If we welcome them with joy, and encourage them to take part in our service and to share our communion with God, then we are telling them, “This is how pleased God is to include you in the heavenly kingdom.”

Again, Jesus said, “Where two of you agree on earth, it will be done by my Father in heaven.” Our actions and our prayers have cosmic significance. That means that our actions and our prayers travel to the ends of all creation. The sexual assaults committed by members of the church have created victims far beyond the church and school community. These harmful actions affect every Christian in their ability to proclaim the gospel.



On the other hand, if our actions and prayers fit in with God’s will, then this is something to celebrate. Last Thursday was the commemoration of the martyrs of New Guinea. Those men and women stayed with their people and were killed when the Japanese invaded, and so the people remembered their faithfulness and, after the war, the church went from strength to strength. That was seventy years ago, but the people still remember. ABM continues to stand by the people of Papua New

Guinea, through flooding, the HIV AIDS epidemic and now the COVID-19 pandemic. This is something which will not be forgotten.

Closer to home, I caught up with a Sri Lankan man who told me that he had never forgotten the welcome he received forty years ago at St Cuthbert’s, Prospect. He named the people who welcomed him and said that if it had not been for them, he might have given up his faith. How good it is to hear such stories! Through the actions of such people God’s name is glorified and gate of heaven is opened wide.



I have no doubt that people here have been as welcoming, generous and warm-hearted as that. In fact, young William Malcolm is being brought for baptism in this church today because someone recommended this church. William’s baptism here is the result of the kindness of someone in this church.

Maybe we do not see any immediate result of our kindness. That’s not a bad thing, because the welcome we give, the encouragement we offer is not for ourselves, but for others. And the results of our kindness may still be evident years and generations later. Let us be faithful in this, and open our hearts to the little ones we meet day by day, regardless of age, gender, race, marital or family status, sexual orientation, disability or wealth. Let us have confidence in God that these people will know that God’s heart is open to them in heaven.