**Humble servant** 18/8/24dkm md am

Read: Mark 9:30-50, James 4

Text: Mark 9:33-37

Psalms: 139:1-6 &23-24, 131, 3:1-6, 134a

Jesus began his ministry saying that the kingdom of heaven was at hand; those who repent and believe in the gospel belong in this kingdom (1:15). In the Sermon on the Mount, he spoke further about entering this kingdom, and living in this kingdom. The ‘poor in spirit’, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, and the persecuted belong in this kingdom. There is no mention of the self-righteous being rewarded, or bullies getting a blessing! The kingdom of heaven is very different to the kingdoms of this world- it is ‘good, different’. Jesus is King of this kingdom, and he expects citizens to be living according to his commands, and above all, to be imitating him. His command is, ‘Love one another as I have loved you’ (John 13:34). The apostle Paul said, ‘Imitate me even as I imitate Christ’ (1Cor 11:1).

The kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God has not yet come in its fullness, but it is prefigured in Jesus and his followers- in the church, if you like. With Jesus as head, the church should be a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven cannot be likened to any kingdom of this world. Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world’ (John 18:36). The disciples struggled to understand this truth, and many today also struggle to understand the kingdom of heaven. We are in the world but not of the world. Entry into, and life within this kingdom, bears no resemblance to entry into, or life in, a kingdom of this world.

In an object lesson about the kingdom of heaven, Jesus pointed to a little child he had called into his ‘classroom’. Mark places this ‘lesson’ in a house in Capernaum (9:33). Matthew places Jesus in Capernaum in the preceding story (Mat 17:24). Luke, like Mark, places this incident directly after Jesus’ second prediction of his impending death (Luke 9:46f). Jesus must have been terribly disappointed with their response to him telling them how he would suffer and be killed; their sorrow did not last long (Mat 17:23). After his first prediction, Peter took him aside and rebuked him. After this second prediction, they started arguing about who would be the greatest. But Jesus patiently went on teaching about the kingdom of heaven, about entering this kingdom, and about greatness in this kingdom. He teaches while holding a little child or young child in his arms.

**1. Entry to the kingdom of heaven**

Entering the land of Tonga you read, ‘Welcome to the Kingdom of Tonga’. Some people pay a lot of money for permission to enter the kingdom of Australia. Some are working hard at learning the language or at getting a job here. There are a lot of boxes to tick before you can enter this country. Some people think it is the same with the kingdom of heaven. They are giving money to the poor and doing good works in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Some even claim mighty works done in the name of Jesus (Mat 7:22). But the Lord says to these people, ‘I never knew you’.

The disciples had been with Jesus for a couple of years. They worked miracles in the power given them by Jesus (Mat 10:1). They accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah; Peter confessed, ‘You are the Christ’ (8:29). But they failed to understand Messiah and the nature of his messianic kingdom. They thought he would, ‘restore the kingdom to Israel’ (Acts 1:6), as in the Davidic kingdom, an earthly kingdom. Still today there are people looking for this earthly kingdom to be restored, and they are not all Jews! They assume they are in the kingdom and are now jostling for positions of greatness in this kingdom. ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ they ask.

What does it mean to do the will of God? First and foremost, it means to believe in Jesus. ‘This is the work of God that you believe in him whom he sent’ (John 6:29). Jesus told Nicodemus that unless one was born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). To enter the kingdom of God you must be born again; you must, like a child, believe and not doubt that Jesus died to save you from sin and death. We call this conversion, an inner change of mind and heart that makes us a new creation in Christ Jesus (2Cor 5:17).

In answer to his disciple’s question about the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus refers to being converted, to doing a complete U-turn with regard to what you think, what you believe, and how you live; this is in Matthew’s account (Mat 18:3). He does not at this time speak of being born again, but he does speak of becoming like a little child. A little child believes whatever they are told. They believe without questions and without doubts. This makes them vulnerable of course, but it also makes them feel secure and contented, and not worried about who is the greatest.

In answering the disciple’s question, Jesus picks up on something else about little children, their humility. Faith is necessary in order to enter the kingdom; so is humility. The two go together. What is the opposite of humility? Pride! Pride is a great barrier to belief or faith. Pride leads to unbelief. Humility is essential to entering the kingdom and to greatness in the kingdom. ‘Whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’ said Jesus, as a little child sat on his knee (Mat 18:4). What better way was there to explain humility! My dictionary defines humility as humbleness or meekness!

**2. Like a little child**

Little children unashamedly cling to their parent or guardian. I still baby sit at times. I remember when this child was just one and loved to be carried around. When put down he looked to be picked up, especially if he got scared. The child Jesus called may well have learned to walk, although we are not told. Jesus was in the house in Capernaum and women were probably there with their children. As he called the Twelve together for a lesson, he took this little child into his arms (9:36).

A little child is aware of one thing- the adult that feeds and protects him or her. If not fed, he cries; if in danger he runs to his parent. A child like this shows no pride, no concern about being better than other children, no shame about depending on someone. The experts talk about a lack of ‘self-awareness’. Be converted and become like a little child said Jesus. This is what members of the kingdom of God must be like. It is completely different to being in a kingdom of this world. What do you think the church should be like, a playgroup or a parliament? Where do you find the biggest egos?

We are blessed to have contact with little children in our fellowship or in our homes. Children can be naughty at times, and we want them to grow up into independent adults. But consider for a moment a church of toddlers. It might be chaotic, but we would not hear the question, ‘Who is the greatest’. Jesus is not discouraging maturity in the Christian life; he is encouraging maturity **with** humility. He is encouraging greater dependence upon God and less on self.

Jesus loved children and always had time to teach them, and indeed to heal them. Many of the people Jesus healed were children. Yet many preachers today have no time for children; how many engage with children in the church or in teaching Sunday school? Ministering to children, as well as to folk in nursing homes, is a great blessing. Too many preachers focus on ‘more important’ affairs in the church, affairs in which their expertise is most needed, or maybe, just maybe, where they get more recognition.

An older missionary once told me the way to reach the people with the gospel is to teach their children. I took this to heart and started Sunday schools in a number of villages near to where we lived. I recruited students and gave them push bikes or motorbikes to go to these villages each Sunday morning; I sent them off with lessons and with prayer. One day we invited the children from a nearby Hindu village to our house for some cake. As I was walking them back to the village, a man from our campus stopped one of the children and accused of him stealing his son’s tee-shirt; he was a man who claimed to be a Christian. He would probably have ripped it off the village child if I had not intervened. I said that even if it was his son’s shirt he must go to the village and talk with the child’s parents, not bully this child. It was not unusual to have clothes stolen off the line but was this child to blame? Too often I hear a child being blamed for a broken window without any evidence; it may have been the person mowing the lawn!

Jesus loved children, but he also teaches lessons from children. He was not so foolish as to think children are not sinful and that children do not need to be taught, but little children are rather helpless, and they are humble. If a child wants something he or she has to ask. They may be demanding but they do not have a developed ego or pride. Jesus said that unless you become like a little child you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven (10:15, Mat 18:3). I have seen a house with such a low doorway I had to get down and crawl in. I am still looking for a church building with a similar doorway!

Jesus also taught, as he does in today’s passage, that greatness in the kingdom of heaven is directly related to humility, humility shown in receiving a little child. Jesus acted out this lesson by taking a little child into his arms as he taught his disciples. Jesus mostly taught using parables or stories, but sometimes he taught through acting out a scene. My wife is a much better storyteller than me; I prefer acting-out scenes for the purpose of teaching.

**3. Greatness in the kingdom**

There is no place in the kingdom of heaven for people wanting to be great, wanting to lord it over others as the Gentiles do (Mat 20:25). ‘If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all’ (9:35). This is the lesson Jesus was teaching by taking a little child into his arms and speaking about ‘receiving one of these little children in my name’ (9:37). In the kingdom of heaven, receiving a little one in the name of Jesus is tantamount to receiving Jesus (9:37, Mat 18:5, Luke 9:48).

Recall what Jesus said in Matthew 25 about giving food to the hungry and taking in a stranger; ‘In as much as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me’ (Mat 25:40). Jesus was talking about inheriting the kingdom of heaven. He is talking about being in the kingdom of heaven here also as he answers the disciple’s question about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. The one who humbles himself like a little child will be greatest. The one who chooses to be last will be first. The one who chooses to serve as the Lord himself served will be recognised as great in the kingdom of God. ‘The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve’ (10:45).

Mark reports more of what Jesus said than Matthew here in verse 37, saying that whoever receives me receives ‘him who sent me’, namely God the Father. Jesus said the one who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him (John 5:23). So, receiving a little child in the name of Jesus is no small matter. Children are precious to Jesus, and they should be to us also, especially to leaders in the church.

In ancient pagan societies children were seen as a burden or nuisance. They were of no help on the farm or the factory; they were of no use in the army. Baby Moses was sent away by the princess to be nursed- by his mother as it happened. Infanticide was not uncommon- it was like abortion today. Modern society still struggles to ‘receive’ or value little children. The horror of abortion continues to be sanctioned in our society; what a terrible sin this is. To abuse or neglect children also ranks high as a sin, a sin against Jesus and against God; thankfully our society has child protection laws, although in its lack of wisdom, promotes divorce which breaks up the family where children should be nurtured.

The kingdom of heaven is vastly different to the kingdoms of this world. In the kingdom of heaven everyone relates to Jesus. There are no blood relations, just spiritual relations or relations in Christ, which is everyone in heaven. Jesus is to me as Jesus is to you. We relate to one another in and through Jesus. And we must be like children before him. We must be humble and not self-centred. We must be seeking to please Jesus as a son wants to please his father. We are to love one another and build one another up in their most precious faith. Beware of tearing down one of the Lord’s precious children.