

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost, September 23, 2018, Liturgical Year "B"

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 9:30-37

"Little Children"

Last week's Holy Gospel ended with Jesus telling the Apostles, "*This kind can come out only by prayer.*" (Mark 9:29) Did you wonder why for our Gospel Hymn we sang "Forty Days and Forty Nights?" Was there anyone here thinking "oh, they should be wearing purple?" Just the prayerfulness of that Hymn causes us to, as we should during Lent, prayerfully look at our lives – and the One who forgives us answers our prayers – and how much He wants us and loves us – even to the point of His own sacrifice. Not long after last week's and today's Holy Gospel the Apostles will be following Jesus on a journey – their last journey to Jerusalem. He is leading His disciples toward the destination of His ministry and the cross.

This was time for Jesus to focus on teaching His disciples. His last opportunity to get in their minds, in their hearts, He needed to equip them to carry on the ministry when He returned to the Father, and to prepare them for coming events. These were not going to be easy events to deal with. When Jesus was arrested in the garden – they ran! They had to be equipped. I can't help but feel sorry for the disciples at this point, because they continually just don't understand – they just don't get it. When Jesus warned them about the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod they thought He was making a comment about them forgetting to bring bread. They have struggled to get their minds round the fact that Jesus often says things that have a clear meaning on the surface, but He wants them to look under the surface and find a hidden meaning somewhere else. And now, He tells them something which we realize that He means literally; and they are baffled, they are blown away, because they are looking for a hidden meaning and can't find it.

Jesus doesn't even attempt to tell parables to them, He is being straight forward with them, He is shooting from the hip, as He approaches Jerusalem and His upcoming suffering and death - He is simply trying to tell them what He can see is going to happen. He will be handed over; He will be killed; but then there is the hope - He will rise again. Why couldn't they understand? You see that was not even on their radar – and because of their understanding of what a Messiah might do. They have heard all along that the Messiah would do this, the Messiah would do that, and the culture made them hear that when the Messiah comes – He will be a warrior who would push down the Romans. I want to suggest to you that not all Jews of that time believed that God would send a Messiah and still nobody at all believed that, if and when God did send one, that the Messiah would have to suffer and have to die. There was a spilt belief. There were two factions, or shall we say forces in Judaism. There were the Pharisees, who believed in an after-life. And then there were the Sadducees, who did not believe in an after-life in heaven. The way I remember this is they are so sad- you-see. Think about that. I tell our Wednesday night classes that the Sadducees were limited, and the Pharisees were legalists. They are the ones who said to Jesus that His followers were not washing their hands before eating. What really threw them for a loop is that the disciples were trying to see hidden meanings in things which Jesus meant clearly. Jesus told them: "*The Son of Man is going to be*

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betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” (Mar 9:31)

They were trying to figure out who is this ‘*Son of Man?*’ This was even though they heard Jesus say this over and over again. We, who know the truth about Jesus, because we know the ending. We can go to the Book of Revelation and see exactly how it plays out. Good Jews of the day knew that this phrase echoes the great dream-picture in Daniel 7, where ‘*one like a son of man*’, referring to ‘*the people of the saints of the most high*’. They didn’t see that Jesus was talking about Himself, He might as well have said “I am going to...” but He was trying to tell them of the relationship with God the Father. He is the Son of Man, the representative – the perfect man. They did not see that Jesus was talking about Himself, the One that Peter proclaimed at Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus asked the “who do people say that I am” and they gave Him a big long list. Then Jesus asked them “who do YOU say that I am?” That is a question that ‘he could very well ask us today, here at St. Andrew’s Anglican Church - “who do you say that Jesus is?” Peter jumped up and said, “*that you are the Christ – the Son of the Living God.*” (Matthew 16) Jesus told Peter that he didn’t say those words on his own, but because Jesus’ Father gave those words to him. It still doesn’t seem to have sunk in. They also didn’t quite understand Jesus saying, ‘*after three days He will rise.*’ Peter, James and John had been at the Transfiguration, just before this Gospel event they came down the mountain, after seeing Jesus between Moses (the Law) and Elijah (the Prophets) and then they came down and saw the man (last week) whose son had the demons driven out – and this is a continuation of that. Mark records in Mark 9:9-10, “*As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant.*” Most Jews, especially the Pharisees believed that God would raise the dead bodily at the end of the present age, but they were not expecting that one person would rise from the dead in their very midst, in their very same time frame. They were becoming more and more confused by Jesus’ words.

Let me ask you: when God is trying to say something to you, how good are you at listening? There are many ways that God can speak to you. How many people here have ever opened a Bible and all of a sudden there is a phrase or verse just where you opened it that was just for you. It may seem silly, but it happens. God can speak to you through the service here today, through the words that we preach, through the readings that we have. Do you know Jonah and that worm, who ate the stalk, and he was blaming God, saying “you took away my shelter?” Well, God has a plan and sometimes we can’t see it in spite of the fact that it is right in front of us. The disciples didn’t see Him, and Her was right in front of them. Again, I ask you, when God is trying to speak to you, to say something to you – you don’t necessarily hear “your name, I want to speak to you.” That is not the way God does it – He is a still small voice that touches your heart. That outs this feeling upon you of guilt, or possibly absolute joy. Are you listening? Are you wondering and blaming others for the situation you are in? Or are you thanking God that He is standing with you, no matter how bad it is – that God is going to take care of you?

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He took care of Jonah, He took care of Peter, He took care of the apostles, and He is going to take care of us. Look where we have come since May of 2013! Who would have thought that our church would be as beautiful as it is? This is no longer St. Paul’s – this is St. Andrew’s Anglican Church! I was talking to a gentleman yesterday who raised his family in this building, and all of his kids were baptized here, and He said that he was in awe of what you all have done here. The transforming – God has taken the reins, saying that you have been listening when He has been speaking to you. Are you listening? Are you open to it?

Can you imagine how Jesus must have been frustrated and disappointed that the disciples could only worry about their own status – which was the greatest? That’s the trouble with only getting half the message – the half that they wanted to understand. They thought if Jesus is Messiah, then they have a special place in His kingdom and then they argued about who was the greatest. Jesus tried to jolt them out of that kind of thinking using a child as a teaching aid. The simplest form of human being that knows no guilt, knows no shame – but just knows love. Have you ever looked in the eyes of a young child? What do you see when you look in the eyes of your son, your daughter, your grandchild? You see a love like none other. I don’t care how old that child is. They could have been going to a dance last night, or over the weekend, and you look at them and you say – God gave them to me? He wants us to think like a child. Now that doesn’t mean that we have to forget the algebra or the other things that He has taught us – but He wants us to become more simple. Did you know that in first century Israel, children were not highly rated? I want you to think of the example of the feeding of the five-thousand – there were five thousand men that were counted – and not the women and children, and with the feeding of the four thousand – the same thing! Today, we count all of the people. Jesus is making the point that the disciples won’t gain particular favor or social standing just because they are His followers. He goes on to say that anyone who receives even a child in His name will receive Jesus himself, and thereby will also receive *‘the one who sent me.’* Jesus referred to God the Father in a way that was more reminiscent of John’s Gospel. In other words, anyone at all who is associated with Jesus can have access to royalty, divinity – meaning access to God Himself and the disciples aren’t special in that – all believers are.

When you are baptized you receive the Holy Spirit. When you are Confirmed you receive the Holy Spirit again when you make the outward decision to follow Jesus. That is being a believer. You have the Holy Spirit within you. Saint Paul wrote *“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?”* (1 Corinthians 9:19) WOW! That is why the Temple veils was torn in two! So that we can access to God – and not have to go to the Holy of Holies.

Yesterday, I had the very wonderful privilege of baptizing two beautiful girls into the Body of Christ. This is precisely what Jesus is speaking of – the humility of these girls – Catherine Lee Elliott and Madeline Elizabeth Manning, girls only five and six months old. They were as good as gold – and were so wonderfully at peace when they received the Holy Spirit. Not a tear – they were so receptive. That spoke so very loudly to me – as they looked deeply in my eyes as I baptized and anointed them. Jesus’ words rang true to me, *“Whoever welcomes one of these*

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little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9:37) Jesus wants each one of us to come to Him – amidst all of our worries, troubles and cares – and with the heart of a child – seek Him, and only Him - and receive so much more – God the Father Himself. His words from Matthew 11:28 are words to draw us to Him for peace and comfort – with the faith of a little child in belief of Him. You will hear them in a little while when I walk down the aisle. He said, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*"

Remember it is faith, in Jesus – believing that He is the One who is the answer to all of our questions, our cares and our fears – and through that faith we don't earn any special place – other than being with Him for all eternity. In the same breath as saying you can't earn your way to heaven – you also cannot earn place in heaven – except that one special place of being in His presence.

As Jesus goes to the cross, turning upside down everything His disciples had imagined, He is also turning upside down the way people, including some Christians, still think. Listen to what Jesus told them: "*If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.*" (Mark 9:35) Talk about a paradigm shift! First must be last and everyone's servant?

If we feel sorry for the disciples in their confusion over issues like these, and they would not even get it until the Day of Pentecost, when they received the Holy Spirit in a very special way. We should then ask ourselves just how confused so many people still are. How many people need to hear about Jesus. My answer to this is that we can be in prayer for those who are still confused and pray for their clarity and peace – for Jesus and His Holy Spirit to enlighten them with a spirit of simplicity – just like a child.