

Relinquish power and control in favour of gratitude and humility

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Pentecost + 20 C – Luke 18 15-30

Let the little children come to me, and don't stop them; for it's to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

All Jesus wished for these infants was that they be themselves; little children. As little children they could approach Jesus, go to God, and inherit eternal life – no questions asked. But Jesus' disciples rebuke them as they try to come to him; block their way to their inheritance. Thankfully, Jesus notices and sets things straight. But what if that hadn't happened? Luke wants us to think about this.

Luke brings us towards this encounter with the little children by way of a series of parables; parables of insiders and outsiders. And just after this encounter, we meet a ruler who is the proverbial insider. Luke surrounds the little children brought to Jesus with stories of people excluded by such insiders. How are these little children to be protected from that fate if they are among the lucky ones who grow up?

Luke gives us a powerful message in his account of the ruler who asks, what must I do to inherit eternal life? The man turns out to be so blinded by his sense of entitlement, so convinced of his own good character, and so straitjacketed by his obligations to his family's wealth that he couldn't begin to follow Jesus, even if he'd wanted to. And he didn't want to. He wanted to inherit eternal life, served up on a silver platter just like everything else he'd received in life.

Just before this episode, Luke reminds us that Jesus said all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. As an example of this, the contrast between the little children and this ruler couldn't be plainer. And it's also helpful to know that in that part of the world, great wealth was traditionally viewed as the result of theft from the poor.

Let's think about the people bringing even infants to Jesus. Before the little children could respond to Jesus' invitation, they had to be brought to a place where they could see Jesus for themselves, and hear his voice welcoming them. They needed to be brought to a place where they could choose to take their own first steps towards Jesus. They needed their parents to support them so they could run the gauntlet of those pompous disciples – come to Jesus with eyes and ears only for him. That's a challenge many young people must face today; many run the gauntlet of an alien or unwelcoming church, yet still find Jesus here. So our welcoming crew are some of the most important ministers in this church on a Sunday morning.

But where does the rich ruler fit in here? He's at the place where lots of Australians find ourselves – deluded by our sense of entitlement. He's like the other brother in the parable of the prodigal son. His issue was inheritance too. Who but a wealthy heir could assume inheriting eternal life was possible? All the perks with no idea of the grace of a community of justice, mercy and faithfulness – just eternal life delivered on a platter. Jesus said that belonged to the little children. So why shouldn't this ruler ask to inherit eternal life for himself? Good question!

Attachment to family obligations was his trap. As a ruler, he was the current custodian of his family's wealth and honour. What he had belonged to his ancestors and to his descendants as much as it did to him. Jesus told him, sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. But he would have

felt that he had no right to dispose of the family assets – and he certainly hadn't come to talk with Jesus about following him.

We've heard a call like Jesus' call to the ruler before. It's God's call to Abraham; the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation." When God called Abraham, it was a call to leave his inheritance behind – to leave his identity behind – for the sake of a posterity he could only dream of. Jesus' call to the wealthy ruler was the same call. And when Jesus called the children – again, the same call – the same command. Break through what is fearful and unknown and come, follow me to a posterity that is going to exceed your wildest dreams.

How insistent this call is! It's different for each of us, but always the same call; always calling people to let go of what is most precious to us. Truly I tell you, [said Jesus] ... no one who's left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God...won't get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come, eternal life. We're called to let go of power, wealth and control. And as the disciples showed, and the Church has ever since, we need regular reminding of it many generations on. We still don't get the camel through the needle's eye – that it's God who makes our impossible possible. We're so attached to our treasure here that we're not available to God. That's today's challenge.

Every birth is a grace; a sign that God still trusts us; a chance for us to renew our own commitment to relinquish power and control in favour of gratitude and humility. A child's presence among us today is Christ's renewed call to us; 'Let go, travel light and follow me.' And for that call, we give him thanks and praise. Amen