

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 20, 2015

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The Apostles were discussing which of them was the greatest. And we get to listen in! It is easy to put *the worst possible* interpretation on their conversation. But this really is unwarranted and unnecessary. For all we know these men were contemplating which of them had become most like Jesus. And the clue to this interpretation is in Our Lord's response. He names two qualities which will forever be associated with being Christ-like: being a servant, and being like a child. Remember, will you, that when we say "being like Jesus" it means nothing less than to assume some of the character of Almighty God. For it is as the Lord Himself said, "Whoever receives Me receives Him Who sent Me," and, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father."

What this does *not* mean is that God is a servant or acts childlike! When Jesus said, "I am among you as one who serves" He was not limiting God. He was saying that *among us* God Incarnate is a servant. Because Our Lord is the perfect and final revealing of God to us, then this business about being a servant is the path by which you and I can know God personally. Being a servant, being childlike, is the way to the Father made accessible by the Son.

The mindset of Christ the servant is revealed fully in the Cross. The Cross preaches many things. But certainly among them are silent suffering, patience, and forbearance, in the One Who became poor and helpless in solidarity with those who are poor and helpless.

When Jesus tells those who would follow Him, "The first shall be last" He is warning in advance that some of the very attributes that work for getting to the top of the heap in the secular world, (pride and aggressiveness), are not going to get us very far in God's Kingdom. The reason why this is so is that these qualities tend to center not on God but on *self*. Those souls who are at the back of the pack are less likely to harbor such a mindset and are therefore living in closer approximation to God's Son. This is not to say it is wrong to aspire to be the best you can, using the talents God has given you. The Lord told a parable about that. But if we aspire to follow Christ we shall not find Him by grabbing the money, the power, and the status.

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That is the part about being a servant. Then there is the wonderful business about being childlike. We will always associate this teaching with the beautiful image of the Lord Jesus taking a child and placing him in the midst of the apostles and teaching about our approach to our Heavenly Father.

The point is that in the mystery of the Holy Trinity *Jesus is like a child to His Father*. This powerfully teaches that in our becoming like a child we become more like God the Son. What that means fully we cannot know. But it certainly begins with what we *do* know. A child has no fear or pretense holding him back. It is growing up that makes us become inhibited. Thank God that is so in many ways! But our conventional conduct as adults must never extinguish the flame of our free and natural relationship to Almighty God. Jesus says this relationship must remain childlike: trusting, fearless, without pretension, and totally natural. Not *childish*! The relationship must grow and mature, but do so without becoming stifled or cynical or fearful.

I love retelling the story about Canon Bromby who was an English vicar at Clifton, a suburb of Nottingham about 1910. After a catechism service one Sunday the clergyman returned to the sacristy at about the time a very little girl, perhaps four years old, and having sat through the long service, announced to her mother, "I must speak to the vicar!" Her mother was amused but said it wasn't possible. But the little girl insisted to the point her mother, very embarrassed, brought her daughter to the sacristy door. With apologies to Canon Bromby, the mother presented her little girl, who looked up brightly at the tall priest still in his surplice and biretta. "I love you," she said, "because you are good, and because you have such beautiful white hair. This is for you." And she opened her fist and gave him a partially decomposed pear drop she had been clenching in her hand during the service.

Pride and pretension dissolve in God's presence, and up to a certain age a child is free of both. There is no deviousness, no manipulation or calculation to get what he wants. The child has no hesitation about forging a friendship, and is as fearless as this little girl in the sacristy, and as trusting. Jesus, Who is in a position to know, says God approves. A child stands for the only thing in the world that gives some

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accurate, even if incomplete, impression of the divine nature of the Holy Trinity: what God is really like. And Our Lord tells us to strive to keep just that kind of childlike relationship with our Heavenly Father.