

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity
September 23, 2018

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It is easy to put people in a bad light. The news media do that. And bombarded by negativism, we easily pick up the infection. In the gospel you just heard the Apostles were discussing which of them was the greatest. It is easy to put the *worst possible interpretation* on their motives. But this is unwarranted and unnecessary. For all we know they were contemplating which of them had become *most like Jesus*. The clue is in Our Lord's response. Jesus names two qualities which will forever be associated with being Christ-like: being a *servant*, and being like a *child*.

Remember Our Lord said "whoever receives Me receives Him Who sent Me" and "He who has seen Me has seen the Father." So it follows that being like Jesus means nothing less than to assume some of the character of Almighty God. This is not saying God is a servant or acts childlike! When Jesus said "I am among you as One who serves" He was not limiting God but was declaring that among us *God Incarnate* is a servant. And because Our Lord Jesus is the perfect and final revelation of God to us, this business about being a servant is the path by which we can know God personally. When the disciples were discussing who was the greatest, this was the Lord's response. Being a servant, and being childlike, is the path to the Father made accessible by the Son.

The form and manner of the servant is fully revealed in the Cross of Christ. The Cross reveals many things, but among them are silent suffering, patience, and the forbearance of One Who became poor and helpless in solidarity with those who *are* poor and helpless. When the Lord tells those who would follow Him "the first shall be last" He is warning in advance that some of the very attributes that go to work for getting us to the top of the heap: pride and aggressiveness, are not going to get us very far in God's Kingdom. Why? These qualities tend to center not on God but on self. Those souls who are at the *end* of the line are less likely to harbor such prideful thoughts, and are therefore living in closer approximation to God's Son. Now this is not to say it isn't right to aspire to be the best you can be, using the talents and opportunities God has given you. But if we set out to follow Christ we shall not find Him by grabbing the money, the power, and the status.

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That's the part about being a *servant*. Then there is the Lord's teaching about the *child*. We will always associate this teaching with the beautiful image of Jesus setting a child in the midst of the Apostles and talking about our approach to our Heavenly Father. The Lord gives us a peep into the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Jesus is like a child to His Father. In our becoming like a child we become more like God the Son. We cannot fully know what that means in this life. 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 (thankfully 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*! It is the Holy Spirit Who perfects the natural, making it supernatural. The relationship must grow and mature, but do so without becoming stifled or cynical or fearful or reserved.

Jesus and the child always reminds me of the story about Canon Bromby, the English vicar at Clifton near Nottingham in 1910. After an afternoon catechism service one Sunday the clergyman returned to the sacristy at about the time a very little girl, perhaps four years old, having sat through the long service, announced firmly to her mother: "I must speak to the vicar!" Her mother was amused, but said it wasn't possible. The little girl insisted to the point that 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 announced, "because you are good, and because you have such beautiful white hair. This is for you." With that, she opened her fist and gave him a sticky lemon 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 and trusting as this little girl in the sacristy. Jesus, Who is in a position to know, says *God approves*. A child represents one of the things in the world which give some

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