

Grovely Parish 6th September 2020

Text: Matthew 18.10

Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.

This may seem a rather strange text for a Sunday sermon but it is a text with a message for us. It is a text that speaks to us about how we should treat each other, and particularly treat those who are often powerless in society.

So, let me begin this morning by looking at this text, and the teaching it contains.

The significant words in this text are the words, "little ones." For once you understand who the little ones are, then the text becomes more meaningful. The little ones are the people you don't notice, or you choose not to notice, because you consider them unimportant or expendable. The little ones would have included children in this group. At the beginning of this section in Matthew's gospel, which is concerned about the Little Ones, Jesus puts a child in the midst of his disciples to teach them something about, who is important in the eyes of God. But Jesus could equally have put, a frail elderly person, or someone with a physical or mental handicap, or a person in poverty, in the midst of the disciples. For the little ones included all those with little of no status or importance in that society. I suppose in today's terms we would call the "little ones," the disadvantaged or the marginalized.

The extraordinary thing about Jesus' teaching is that the ones, who society considered to be of little importance, are the most important in the eyes of God.

They are the ones, Jesus tells us, who are allocated the most important guardian angels. These are the angels closest to the Father, and see the face of the Father.

At this point, it seems appropriate for me to say something about guardian angels. In the Jewish thinking of that time, there was the belief that every person had a guardian angel. The role of this guardian angel was to give protection and support to the individual. The Christian Church, in some measure, has taken up this belief in guardian angels. Although I should say, while the belief in guardian angels is not a key doctrine of the Christian Church, it is a comforting belief. It declares we are never abandoned. We have our guardian angel to help us.

I had an aunt, long dead now, who used to say regularly something like,

“You should thank your guardian angel that everything has turned out so well,” or “You should thank your guardian angel that things are not as bad as they could be.” She had a strong belief in the importance, and care of guardian angels. Guardian angels were important to Jesus, for he speaks about their role in people lives.

Jesus is saying to his disciples that in the ways of God, the most vulnerable people are the ones who need the best of care, so the most important guardian angels are given to them. These are the angels, who see the face of God. What Jesus is saying to his followers is that God the Father has a special concern for the weakest members of society, and for the care of them.

Like the Father, Jesus, - the Son, also has a deep concern for the weakest members of society. This is reflected in the section of Matthew’s gospel, just before today’s gospel

reading. In that section Jesus speaks about the importance of caring for the vulnerable ones of society.

Jesus is particularly hostile to those who deliberately cause hurt to a Little One. We have this passionate declaration by Jesus:

“It would be better for you if a millstone was put around your neck, and you were thrown into the sea, rather than be answerable to God, for the hurt you cause to a Little One, that is to a vulnerable one.”

You could dismiss this statement simply as the use of dramatic, or exaggerated language, but it shows that God is very concerned about the treatment of the needy, and the vulnerable. What we can say from Jesus’ statement is that the little ones are very important in the eyes of God, and we mistreat them at our peril.

The way that God wants us to treat the powerless of society is to care for them. Immediately after Jesus tells us, not to despise the little ones, Jesus tells a story about the caring shepherd. The shepherd we are told leaves his flock, and deliberately cares for that sheep, which is in greatest need, which is the lost sheep. In Jesus’ story of the shepherd, no sheep is expendable; no sheep is not worth the shepherd’s efforts to care about. In fact, the shepherd makes the most effort for the sheep, which is most in need. The analogy that Jesus is making is that no person is expendable. Every person is worth caring about in the eyes of God.

The implication from Jesus’ story about the shepherd is that the little ones of society, that is the vulnerable ones of society, are the ones we should make the most effort to care for, because they are the ones most in need, and cannot fend for themselves.

Today's gospel reading is about relationships and how you treat others, particularly how you treat the so-called unimportant people in the world.

It is part of an extended section in Matthew's gospel that begins by reminding the followers of Jesus that being great in the kingdom of heaven is not about domination, and power. Instead, it is about being humble, and being concerned about others, rather than being concerned only about your own needs.

In Jesus' teaching the usual social order is reversed. In the eyes of God the vulnerable and needy are considered the important ones, and how you treat these vulnerable ones is the measure of your greatness. While the powerful and important are encouraged to be humble, and care for those in need.

Let me finish my sermon today with a very ordinary story.

A little while ago I had to go to a Pathology Collection Centre to have a blood sample taken. It was a Monday morning, and the waiting room was crowded. So, I sat there waiting to be seen by the nurse. It was an interesting study in how you treat others. One woman came up to the nurse, with a rather angry look on her face. When asked the question, "Have you fasted?" the woman replied in an aggressive voice:

"Why don't you read what is written on the form?"

I was impressed that this overly busy nurse did not mirror this woman's behaviour, but simply said, "I'm required to ask."

I thought to myself, this is not the way to speak to another person. Did this woman feel she had the right to bully this other person? If she did, she was wrong. Being dominating, and speaking aggressively to another person is not the way for one person to treat another person.

A little later, a somewhat confused, very elderly woman came up to the nurse, as there was some concern about her paper work. The nurse could easily have been impatient or rude to the elderly lady, but she wasn't. The nurse very caringly said to the woman: "Don't worry. I'm sure I can work it out," and she went to her computer, and in time found the lost piece of paper.

I could only think that this elderly woman's guardian angel would have smiled that the woman was being treated so thoughtfully.

I saw in my short time in the waiting room; someone who had an attitude of disregard for another person, and someone who had an attitude of high regard for another person.

How we treat each other is of fundamental importance in Jesus' teaching.

New Testament is full of wisdom about how one person should treat another. There is for example that powerful statement by Jesus: "Do unto others, as you would want them to do unto you."

But I very much value St Paul's advice about how to relate to others. Paul would encourage us to build all of our relationships on what he called, "The Fruits of the Holy Spirit." We are encouraged to build your relationships on love, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These qualities are the building blocks of happy and enriching relationships.

It is in our everyday encounters that we put into practice the teachings of the New Testament. It is how we speak to each other, how we relate to the person at the supermarket checkout, how we speak to the pathology nurse. These small encounters are important, for they either enrich lives, or diminish lives.

Jesus is saying to us through today's gospel that the measure of our greatest is how we treat others; particularly those who have little influence or power. This is true of nations, in their treatment of those most in need. It is true of every person in the way we treat, and speak to each other.

And Jesus said:

Take care that you do not despise or hurt one of these little ones, for in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven."