

‘Grow up’ is a chorus often enough repeated by schoolteachers and parents everywhere. I’ve used it often enough, but, frankly, I find myself thinking it more often not about children but when it comes to dealing with adults. It’s completely unreasonable to expect children to act with a maturity that is beyond their years. The question is whether the expectation of maturity even in adults is itself reasonable. And what do we mean when we talk about maturity?

Particularly when he writes to the Christians in Corinth, who exhibited all sorts of immature behaviour, Saint Paul tries to call them to understand Christian maturity. He makes a distinction between human wisdom and the power of God, pointing out that *while Jews seek signs, and Greeks desire wisdom, we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.* (1Cor 1.22-25)

What Paul is saying to the Corinthians is, indeed, ‘Grow up!’ but not as we, or they, might expect. They have wedded themselves to the spirit of the age so as to be convincing and acceptable to the people around them. Are they Jews? Let’s show them signs! Are they Greeks? Let’s show off our wisdom! And they order their church according to the principles of the world around them. Paul can see that this has led them to nothing other than aping the immaturities of their time and culture. Paul’s understanding of faith is that it doesn’t depend on signs, and it doesn’t depend on being wise and clever. There are plenty of wonder-workers, and there are plenty of fine philosophers, and Paul himself has been involved in the working of wonders as well as writing some pretty good philosophy, yet this isn’t what the life of faith is all about.

We can do all these things, Paul is telling the Corinthians, but that takes us no further than our own accomplishments. The accomplishment of God is seen and found in Christ crucified. The maturity of the Christian lies in the understanding that God’s ultimate accomplishment for the human race is the crucifixion of God’s son. Here all the cleverness, all the pomp and circumstance, all the trappings of power – all the Emperor’s new clothes – all these things are stripped away, and nothing is left but sacrificial love.

The theme for the first session of this year’s Lent course is ‘Receiving Christ as children of God’. Why, then, have I started this address with a reflection on growing up? For the same reason as Saint Paul to the Corinthians. Christian maturity involves an honest and grown-up recognition of the illusion that we can assert our own dignity or identity apart from God, and an understanding that identity and dignity is ultimately found in complete abandonment to God’s presence and God’s will. The cross is transformed from abasement and defeat into exaltation and victory because as Jesus dies there he is totally abandoned to the love of the Father, and when there is nothing but love, then there is no longer any death, but simply life eternal.

To be a child of God is to have the maturity to leave go of the human comfort blankets, so as to be completely dependent on God’s love alone.

What does a child of God look like?

- Children of God don’t go looking for human support or approval. This doesn’t mean that they can’t appreciate the kindness of others; and, as in a married relationship, God may give other people, their love and their presence, as a gift to be appreciated, but for a child of God the only dependent relationship is the relationship with God.
- Children of God don’t go out looking for other people to be dependent on them. In a hierarchical Church, clergy and other authority figures need to take this one to heart. We are not here to get satisfaction by allowing the communities we serve to become dependent on us. This is why there is so much teaching in the gospels about humble service – a brief reminder that *the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve* should be enough to convince us of this.
- Children of God receive Christ by looking out for opportunities to be like Jesus. These can range from the yearning to spend quiet time with the Father, to the longing to heal the ills of humankind, to the willingness to take up the cross of suffering and shame.

- Children of God are like Jesus in another important way. Think of the Garden of Gethsemane, or the agitation of Jesus after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem – *Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—“Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.* The way of Jesus, because it demands the denial of self, and of all those things the world expects us to want and need, is accompanied by struggle and anguish. Like any relationship of love, the relationship of God’s children with the God of love has to be constantly worked at, and never taken for granted.

All these things show that to be a child of God also requires a high level of human maturity, but they do sound rather daunting, don’t they?

Let me then offer some words of comfort. Julian of Norwich knew both the joy of being a child of God, and the searing pain and sorrow that comes when we are aware of our own rebelliousness and inadequacy before God. Julian’s deep depression and total withdrawal from the world are brought to an end by the vision of God holding the world in the palm of his hand; the world, with all its pain and sorrow, all its smallness and self-centredness, is not only small and insignificant – unworthy – before God, but also loved by God, held by God, wanted by God.

And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, ‘What may this be?’ And it was answered generally thus, ‘It is all that is made.’ I marvelled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it.

To receive Jesus – to know Jesus as a child of God – is to have a trust and confidence that God holds us, as God held Jesus, through all the things of this life, even through death, because God made us, God loves us, and God keeps us.

Let me leave in your minds a prayer of Julian:

God, of your goodness, give me yourself; you are enough for me, and anything less that I could ask for would not do you full honour. And if I ask anything that is less, I shall always lack something, but in you alone I have everything.

Amen.

PC, 5th March, 2017