

Reign of Christ and Children's Sabbath November 23, 2008 Sermon: The Least of These

To prepare for this Children's Sunday, I spent some time on the Internet reading stories about children in Canada and around the world. Children – the most vulnerable population on the planet – the ones who fall sick first, who are the first to be abused, the first to be victimized, the first to die – the last and least of these. Children – whose lives we claim to value above all others. Children – the treasure of our lives, the faces on which is written how much or how little we have heeded the words of Jesus: "Whatever you did for the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did for me."

Let me tell you about Sammy. Sammy's parents got a divorce, and he and his Mom went to live with his grandmother for a while. Then they moved out on their own. Sammy's mother suffered from severe depression after the divorce, and was unable to work. Sammy's Dad disappeared from the picture. Sammy had a hard time at school, because he was always worrying about his Mom. Even when his Mom started to feel better and was able to work, they didn't have enough money. The only jobs she could get were minimum wage jobs in the service sector. He and his Mom had to go to the community food bank for help. Sammy was very embarrassed, but impressed at how his Mom was able to make that little bit of food stretch. Sammy and his Mom now live on the 12th floor of an apartment building – a frightening place where people scream and swear and do drugs and get into fights. They can't afford to move. Sammy is often left alone, because his Mom works two jobs and can't afford a babysitter or regular day-care. Sammy is afraid a lot of the time, and wishes his life could be different. Sammy is one of over 1.6 million children, or 23 per cent of Canadian children, who lived in poverty in 2006. In Victoria, it was 19.2%. That's one in five children! (Vital Signs 2008)

Let me tell you about Reinal, who lives in Brazil, in an area called Bahia that I visited several years ago. Unlike other 9 year old boys, Reinal dreams more than anything of spending a whole day in school. But instead, every morning, he wakes up before sunrise to trudge off to a quarry. For five long hours he works beside his mother, pounding hard, sharp rocks the size of his hands into gravel for road construction; then worn out from his morning labour, he goes to school. Reinal loves to learn, but he misses out on lots of classes and he is always exhausted by the time he gets to school and has a hard time concentrating. The work he does is very dangerous: the dust from the rocks make it very hard to breathe, stones get in your face, you can hurt yourself with your hammer. Dust and sweat blind you. Reinal says, "It's dangerous, but we have to do it to help our mother. It's necessary."

Reinal's mother, not surprisingly, is very unhappy that her son has to work and desperately wants to give him more. But they barely survive on what they earn: the equivalent of \$2.50 a day. "I myself worked as a child." she says sadly. There is no break from the endless routine of hammering rocks, seven days a week, week after week.

The only time that Reinal is able to free his mind is when he is in class. He loves to read, write and sing, and dreams of a better future. He wants to be a teacher some day. Reinal's only regret is that he cannot attend school full time because he does not have a scholarship that will replace the money he makes at work, so that his family won't be poorer if he goes to school full-time.

And then there's Anne-Lise: *"When I was 14, the mayi-mayi from Mangurijipa came and took me by force while I was at home. They threatened my mother, and took me with 20 other girls from my village. With the mayi-mayi I was cleaning, but also fighting on the front-line with a machete. I had a "husband" who beat me all the time. One day, I heard from girls that if there are children with the mayi-mayi, they would receive some help. I took my baby and my courage and I ran away to the NGO the girls had told me about."* Anne-Lise is a 16 year old former child soldier from the Congo

– she has a baby daughter. (Amnesty International Canada) . Did you know that around the world there are estimated to be about 300,000 child soldiers, some as young as 7 years old? (<http://www.romeodallaire.com/child-soldiers.html>) Under international law, the forced recruitment and use of children under 18 in armed forces is illegal. The recruitment of children under the age of 15 is considered a war crime. What can you do? You can write a letter to the Ambassador of the Democratic Republic of Congo through the Amnesty International Canada website; you can also get involved in the United Church's call to action about the current conflict in the north of the country, or donate to the United for Peace Fund, which supports programs to help integrate child soldiers back into society.

“Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me...” says Jesus in this parable of judgement. With the words of Jesus ringing in your ears, what kinds of emotions do those story generate in you? Pity? Compassion? Denial? Frustration? A sense of powerlessness? Guilt?

[Quoting Nathan Nettleton] The thing that is so confronting about Matthew's description of the final judgment is that it is so simple, and yet so difficult, and that it really demolishes any boundaries we have between what we do in church and what we do outside these doors. It is telling us that how we treat the hungry, the needy, the imprisoned, the dirty, the smelly, the confused and the tormented is actually read by God as a measure of our devotion to Jesus. “What you do to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you are doing to me.” *You know what it tells us? It tells us that what we do inside these walls doesn't mean a darn thing, if we aren't involved in Ministry Beyond Our Walls.*

Now if you read this as a law that must be obeyed to the letter in every situation, not only will you exhaust and impoverish yourself very quickly, but you will also find yourself tormented by guilt and fear. It is simply not possible to visit every sick person and every prisoner, or to feed all the hungry and welcome every stranger. None of us have the resources or the time and energy to respond to every need we ever hear about – even needs as strong and compelling as those in the stories we heard. This is even more true in today's world than it was in Jesus' day because it is now possible for us to be aware of the hungry, the sick, the powerless and the prisoners on the other side of the world, and to pick up the phone and a credit card and make a response. But if you do that every time an image of a hungry person is beamed into your living room, or every time you hear a story such as these, someone will soon be cutting up your credit cards. So if it is simply not possible, how on earth are we supposed to respond to the message of this description of the final judgement?

This is a bit of an aside, but it may help address some of the guilt questions. It's worth noting that at the beginning of this, Jesus says it is the *peoples* or the *nations* who are gathered for judgement. It is probably the case that it is more realistic and legitimate to read this as a judgement of the nations than as a judgement of individuals. When we ask how a nation cares for its sick and how a nation cares for its prisoners, and even how a nation cares for the hungry on the other side of the world, we are asking questions which need to be asked and which can be answered. Nations do have the means to respond to whole groups in a way that individuals do not.

But don't make the mistake of thinking that that means it is just governments who are being judged. A nation is still the sum of its people and at least in “democratic” countries like ours, the government is to a large extent a reflection of the people and their values and opinions. We' gone through two elections in the last month, and there's another one coming in a few months. We are responsible for the system in which we live.

Our communities, our province, our nation won't change unless our people change, and if we want the people to change, then we'd better be prepared for the change to begin with us – in our own

hearts, our own reactions, our own priorities. So we might be freed somewhat from the fear of the big judgement, but we are still going to have to ask how we personally should respond to the teaching of these words of Jesus.

If I walked into your house and took a photo of your grandmother down and stomped on it, you'd be hurt and insulted because that image represents that person, and if I defiled the image I'd be defiling your memories of her. Images matter to us – especially holy images – representations of what is sacred in our lives. So if we say that each person is an image of Christ, that is quite a big statement. Even more so if we emphasize that it is those who society generally regards as *the least* who are the most clear images of Jesus. And perhaps then it is even true that it is in the very things that cause them to be regarded as the least — their sickness, their poverty, their vulnerability, their brokenness, their destitution, their anti-social habits — that most reveal Jesus to us. We are used to saying that Jesus identified himself with the sin and brokenness of the world on the cross and took upon himself all our infirmities and woundedness. But it is a more difficult, but ultimately unavoidable, step to see in the brokenness and wretchedness of others the image of the suffering Christ.

Think about it for a moment: Jesus was functionally homeless; he wandered from town to town and lived off the generosity of others, though he was perfectly able to work, and he and his disciples do appear to have gone fishing once in a while. He got into trouble with the local authorities; he probably only owned one set of clothing and shoes; he had a reputation for liking his drink too much; he was arrested on charges of preaching sedition, thrown in prison, and executed as a common criminal, in a way that was designed to wipe all trace of him from history. As a child, he was threatened with a kind of localized genocide, and he and his family became refugees in a foreign country. Who do you think most clearly bears the image of Jesus? Jesus himself, wasn't far off from being "the least of these" – at least to the average on-looker. And Jesus says, "Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me."

I don't have the answers for all of the challenges facing our world. I can't tell you: do this and this, vote this way, send a cheque there, and all the problems will be solved. But finding our way to the answers will begin with contemplating the Christ revealed in people like Sammy, or Reinal, or Anne-Lise, the homeless refugee or the teenage junkie on the street – by seeing their brokenness as a reflection of the brokenness of the whole world, and of our own spirits.

Next time you find yourself haunted by an image of someone in need, whether it be someone who asked you for a dollar on the street or someone you saw malnourished on a World Vision special on TV, take that image with you to prayer. Spend some time asking God to show you how Jesus lives in that person, how that person reveals more of who Jesus is, and how you are called to care for Jesus in her or him. Genuine and worthwhile action for justice does not usually come from knee jerk reactions, but from a deepening prayerful understanding of what is going on and where God is within it. And if you and I spend a bit more time contemplating the meaning of the image of Christ on the street corners, in the crack houses, and in the rock quarries of Brazil, we are far more likely to begin to see how and where the reign of God can begin with us. May the parable of Jesus challenge us and keep us as uncomfortable as we need to be for real and lasting change to happen in us and in our world. Amen.