

## Homily: 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) 2021

About three years ago I was talking to some of the infant children in school as they queued up for their lunch. One of them said to me, “Fr Andrew, I’ve got a riddle for you.” “Oh, yes?” I replied, not overly surprised, as I knew that they had been looking at riddles in class. So he started: “I am a person.” This didn’t narrow it down too much. “I wear black and white,” he continued, looking me up and down as he did so. Call me perceptive, but at this stage I began to work out where this was heading. “I have white skin; I have grey hair...” “What!” I replied. “Well, it’s not me then.” His little finger pointed up at me. “It is you! It is you!” he repeated. Having thanked him for his kindness, I promptly went to have a look in the mirror just to see if I had radically aged that morning. I didn’t think so! I suppose it highlights the way in which children and adults often see things differently. Not just hair colour or age, of course, but also something about the complexities of life. As adults we experience many complicated situations which children may not understand.

Often those complexities come in our relationships with others, and they can lead to situations that are difficult to resolve. In today’s Gospel the pharisees ask Jesus a question about marriage, we are told, to “test Him”. They know that whatever Jesus says, it will be received well by some and not by others. That remains true today, of course. If I’m honest, worry about speaking publicly about marriage, because I know that it is rightly a cause of joy to many; but also, where relationships have broken down, there is often great suffering, and a careless word from someone stood in a pulpit can reopen old wounds. So I want to say only three things about this part of today’s Gospel. Firstly, Jesus does not shy away from teaching the goodness of marriage and of lifelong faithfulness. The Church’s teaching on marriage is not an invention of any Pope – we have heard it ourselves today, from Jesus Himself. We are Christians, and so the word of Jesus is always paramount, even when it’s difficult and even when many people struggle to live by it. There are, of course, very many things that Jesus teaches that we all struggle to live by. But even where it’s difficult, we should always promote what God teaches and recognise its goodness. It is a beautiful thing when a couple are granted many happy years of loving faithfulness to one another, and their marriage is a gift to us all. Secondly, I also notice that Jesus Himself receives those who cannot live by His teaching with great sensitivity and compassion. In St John’s Gospel He meets a woman who is on her fifth marriage, and enters into a beautiful dialogue with her in which He leads her forward in faith. We are Christians, so the example of Jesus is also paramount, and the Church must always take our Lord as her model. Jesus wants to lead every person, regardless of their history or current situation, closer to Him, and the Church must always seek to do the same. Thirdly, I would encourage anyone who is in a complex or difficult situation regarding marriage to come and talk about it. It may be that something can be done to help reconcile your situation with the Lord’s teaching. And if your marriage is in difficulty, seek help: Christian marriages are not immune from problems! But sometimes, with the right support, problems can be worked through. Never suffer in silence.

As adults, we often feel that we should be able to work out problems on our own, whereas children are often quick to ask for help. Perhaps that’s one reason why the Lord teaches

that they are an example to us. People bring their children to Jesus, for Him to bless them, but the disciples send them off. The Lord is deeply unhappy about this. Two weeks ago in the Gospel we heard Jesus teach that to welcome a little child in His name is to welcome Him; now we find that the disciples are turning them away. They are so slow to learn; they have already lost sight of His words. Jesus welcomes the children and uses it as an opportunity to teach the adults how to live. “It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs,” He tells them, and goes on: “Anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” What does He mean?

Fortunately we have an excellent guide to teach us; I mean St Thérèse of Lisieux, whose feast day the Church celebrated on Friday. Her teaching is so important that in 1997 she was declared one of the Doctors of the Church, a fairly rare title given to a saint whose message has universal importance. She was granted a deep understanding of what it meant to be a little child before God. It is certainly not about being *childish*: Thérèse was very immature in her younger years and had a great moment of conversion when she left those childish ways behind but, from that time onwards, came to understand what being a child of God really meant. For her, it means this: perfect trust in God and His goodness, dependence on His mercy and having an absolute certainty that He forgives us when we turn to Him. It means relying on Him as much as possible, being little in the world, not seeking our own greatness but trying to live for love alone. It means not trying to achieve holiness by our own efforts, but living by the grace of God, asking Him for our every need.

Thérèse uses this image in several ways. She imagines herself like a little child at the foot of a staircase, a path to holiness, which seems impossible to climb. She need only make an effort to reach the first step, she says, and her loving Father will pick her up and carry her up the stairs. In another place, she teaches that we should never become discouraged over our faults, because toddlers often tumble but they are too small to do themselves any real harm. She even says that she doesn't worry about falling asleep when she is saying her prayers, because she notices that little children are equally dear to their parents whether they are awake or asleep. For Thérèse, everything is gift, and to be a child of God means to await His gifts with absolute trust and an unshakable belief that we are precious in His sight. It's significant that Jesus talks about us *welcoming* the kingdom of God like little children, not *building* the kingdom, something spiritual teachers often speak of, even today. It is all gift; it is all grace. Her teaching is a beautiful path to holiness and happiness with God, an inspired unfolding of Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel. And it is meant for all of us: even those of us with grey hair!

Fr Andrew

