

14th Sunday After Pentecost – St Paul’s Manuka – 10th September, 2017.**Exodus 12: 1-14****Psalm 149****Romans 18: 10-20****Matthew 18: 10-20****Preacher: The Venerable Dr Brian Douglas**

Ministry is a great privilege. As a priest you are invited in to the lives of people at the most intimate of moments. We are there at moments of birth, sickness, sadness, joy and death. We share with people at times that are very personal. This is a great privilege, but with great privilege comes great responsibility. This is not just a matter for the clergy. We are all trusted with ministry to one another. People will trust us with information and indeed trust us with themselves and as we take on this privilege we need to exercise great responsibility.

Today in the Gospel we receive a rather stern warning from Jesus about ministry. This warning applies to us just as much as it did in the days in which Jesus spoke these words and it speaks to us about both the privilege and the responsibility of what we are called to do.

Jesus tells us to take care that we do not despise one of these little ones. Now who are these little ones? We need to look back a little in the chapter to get an answer. In chapter 18, verses 1-5 the disciples come to Jesus and ask him who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus answers this question by calling a child whom he put among them and then says: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like a child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me!’ So it seems clear that not only is Jesus saying we must care for and not despise children but that we must care for and not despise those who come with the humility of children. This means adults as well as children. Little ones can be people of any age who come amongst us in all humility. There is a tenderness here in what Jesus is saying. He is reaching out to all people recognising that people can be so easily hurt.

Children can be quite surprising in their interactions with adults. I know this well as a very large part of my life has been spent with children of all ages. I remember some years ago when I was a school chaplain some parents came and told me a story their son told around the dinner table one night after I had been to the preschool chapel that day. This little boy told he family he was worried

about me because I was obsessed. True story – not that I am obsessed but what the little said. The parents enquired about the nature of my obsession and he replied that I was obsessed because I was always talking about God! Yes children can say and do the most amazing things in their humility and in their innocency, but it is exactly this trusting nature that can be so easily abused by adults. We know with great sorrow that many children have been physically and sexually abused by adults, in the church and in the wider society. We know too that many children have been grievously injured physically and emotionally by Government policy in the Stolen Generations. Other children are injured and killed through the selfish desire for power in war. We only have to turn on the television to see the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar at present to know how little ones can be despised and hurt. Our own refugee action group has alerted us over the last couple of years to the plight of children who are fleeing war and violence. Their work is valuable in showing us how we can care for little ones and has resulted in valuable work here in our own community of Canberra.

History is littered with examples of how people, including children, have been despised and injured by others. As we consider all these dreadful things we must surely hear the words of Jesus ringing in our ears. ‘Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones’. The abuse of children can never be justified. It is a great evil when such abuse occurs and when little ones are despised and abused. We as Christians must deny and act against any such evil behaviour. I myself serve on the Professional Standards Board of the Diocese where charges of abuse are heard and where decisions are made about the future of abusers. This is a grave responsibility. At present I am preparing for two cases to be heard against church workers.

Jesus in speaking to us today is not just speaking about children here – as important as they and their needs are. He is condemning any abuse – both of children and adults who are humble enough to act in innocency. The evil of prejudice and abuse based on age, race, class, gender and orientation is an evil and it is something that we as Christians must reject.

The current debate in our society about same-sex unions has the potential to harm many through ignorance, prejudice and deliberate misrepresentation, sadly by some in the church. Such bigotry and bias has no place, in my view, in the life of the body of Christ. We may all have the chance to express our opinion in our discussions with one another and in a plebiscite but we need to discuss this matter with respect for others, especially those who take a position different to our own. We have no right to denigrate others whatever side of the argument we espouse.

Today I hear Jesus's voice telling me we need to care for all the sheep – not just some and not just those we feel are acceptable or who are of a certain mind. Our diocesan Synod has been a model of respectfulness in this area in the way it listens to difference and respects others on the issue of same-sex unions. Our own Bishop has acknowledged that we will take different views. This is encouraging and it is also adult. The Synod will revisit this matter in a few weeks and I pray that the same spirit of listening and acceptance will be present in the discussions.

It is as we gather together, even two or three, that we know the presence of the Lord. Jesus comes and stands with in all our diversity. This is what is so wonderful about the Eucharist. We are all welcome to come and stand shoulder to shoulder with others in the strength of our baptism and as we reach out our hands to the Lord we receive his grace and love through the elements of bread and wine, through the words of Scripture and in our gathering together. It is the gathering together in the presence of the Scriptures and the sacramental elements that draws us all together and feeds us. It is here in the Eucharist that we contact sacred and holy things – the Scriptures, the bread and wine and one another. It is here that we enter into sacred space and we in turn by hearing the word and receiving the bread and wine become sacred space ourselves. This is for everyone. There can be no exclusions. We are all in. Jesus died and rose again for all people – not just for some and not just for those who think certain things. We are indeed all the little children for whom Jesus cares and it is his wish that we care for one another – not despising but caring. We should never, as Jesus tells us, despise the little ones – children or adults.

As your Rector over the last 10 years I have tried as much as possible to respect difference in the parish and beyond. We cannot all be the same. At times it has been necessary to challenge bad behaviour – not often, but it is still necessary. I have tried to work with the diversity we have here, respecting all who come to us for ministry. It is really what makes us attractive when we respect the diversity among us. It is nothing less than knowing the wonder of the body of Christ displayed among us. This is really what we say as the bread is broken: 'We who are many are one body, for we all share in the one bread'. At the same time I have my own opinions which may be different to the opinions of others. Be assured that I respect those who take a view different to mine.

Jesus tells us to take care that we do not despise even one of our little ones. We are all little ones. This is a serious command and one which we must take seriously. May God guide and strengthen us all as we consider the way we live with others in peace and love and as we express our opinions.