

## Sunday 31A SFX 2023

As children, one of the greatest things we could do was to wonder. To open up our imaginations with curiosity and joy to make new discoveries. G. K. Chesterton often spoke of the child's ability to wonder, and lamented the fact that we grown-up children have lost our sense of wonder, creativity and imagination.

He said that at the back of our brains there is "a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence. The object of the artistic and spiritual life [is] to dig for this submerged sunrise of wonder; so that a man sitting in a chair might suddenly understand that he is actually alive, and be happy."

In Hereford Cathedral there are some stained glass windows to the local poet and pastor Thomas Traherne, who said of his childhood: "*The skies were mine, and so were the sun and moon and stars, and all the world was mine ; and I the only spectator and enjoyer of it.*" But then he saddened by what he had become as an adult: "So... I was corrupted, and made to learn the dirty devices of this world. Which now I unlearn, and become, as it were, a little child again that I may enter into the Kingdom of God."

Chesterton and Traherne lamented that something we had as children has been lost. If only we could recover that sunrise of wonder, those glimpses of glory that were ours as children, then we might actually be alive and happy.

What happens to us as we grew up? One children's writer Madalene L'Engle says our creativity is destroyed as we pass from childhood to adulthood: "*not through the use of outside force but through criticism, innuendo, by the dirty devices of this world.*" She writes: "*we are hurt; we are lonely; and we turn to music or words, and as compensation beyond all price we are given glimpses of the world on the other side of time and space. We all have glimpses of glory as children, and as we grow up we forget them.*"

It is true that the hopes and dreams of childhood, the innocence and idealism of youth are indeed diminished by so many dirty devices of the world. Our Gospel is about that. Hearing the evidence of the Covid Inquiry, no wonder people have lost trust in politicians, no wonder people have become angry and cynical. Watching in despair at what has happened in Israel and what is happening in Gaza, is it any wonder we are so tired of hate and war and that no one has the courage or ability to find a new path of humanity and common decency so that people can live together in peace.

Wonder is important in our world. It creates room to consider alternative possibilities: different ways to think about the world and organizing this this fragile home we have made.

According to research, learning to trust begins in the womb, the fetus-child is already sensitive to the love of both mother and father even long before actual birth. In infancy, low self-esteem can kick in as we learn the do's and don'ts of life. As we grow shame and guilt can stop us taking the initiative, can diminish our creative zeal as we are told to "sit down, stop doing that and behave!"

This of course is all a quite normal part of the wonderful process of growing up. But

something rather sad can happen that makes us lose confidence in our own self-worth. And losing confidence in ourselves we try on different masks to try to show a better face to the world. The mask feels comfortable because it seems to hide something that we do not want others to see. We develop protective shells, Teflon coatings to protect us against some of the hard things that the world throws at us.

And worse than that our exterior can become hard and coarse. We put faith in what we have, rather than who we are. Fancy hats, expensive cars, or posh houses can be a cover for or inner poverty. We put our faith in position and status and authority to mask over our inner insecurity.

Jesus has very harsh words for the pharisees. Broader phylacteries, longer tassels, places of honour, front seats, exalted titles. And Jesus is hard on those in religious authority as they have care and responsibility of others and because their faith and trust in a loving God is the most precious thing a person has.

Thomas Merton talks about the false self and the true self. He says we need to know who we are again. We must find our true selves. It is a spiritual disaster to rest content with our exterior identity, the passport picture of ourselves "since we are made in the image and likeness of God there is no other way to find out who we are than by finding, in ourselves, the divine image" [*The New Man*].

It is not just Pharisees that have problems with pride. We all of us have a false exterior, this shell that has grown around us as we have gone through life. Some of it is of our own making. Some of it might be like a Victorian Villa others have erected on our freehold. However it comes about, we have to knock it down a bit to find the virgin rock - find in ourselves that divine image.

Jesus in his preaching and teaching tried to give us a glimpse of our true selves again. That child whom God created and loves and still loves to the core. How can we unlearn our cynicism and our anger? How can we remove the masks and share our genuine selves with each other - in trust and without fear? How can we glimpse again the glory of who we are and who we are called to be? How can we unlearn those dirty devices to become a child again to enter the Kingdom of God?

We are all burdened, and we all tie up heavy burdens on each other. But Jesus speaks of a better way of going through life. We can free people by loving them - he did - we can build up trust, we can raise self-esteem, we can unleash people's zest for life. Freed and unburdened by genuine love, we can glimpse and help others glimpse again, the glory that the passing of the years has obscured - that glory of our true selves made in the image and likeness of God.