



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A

Child

Readings: Zechariah 9: 9-10, Ps 144, romans 8: 9, 11-3, Matthew 11: 25-30

My old buddy, Sir Michael Jagger, is in the news again. Pushing 80 and still strutting his stuff like a demented chicken and with more animal magnetism than a pride of lions our Michael is rumoured to be on the verge of getting married to his partner of nine years, the choreographer Melanie Hamrick, 36.

Sir Michael's track record is long and complex but, with a seven-year old in tow, we can only wish them luck. His musical reflections on relationships are, after all, the 'go-to' text of the 'baby boomer' generation.

Who can forget the assertion of permanence in 'Love is love and not fade away', the reflections on materialism in 'I can't get no satisfaction', the anti-feminist rant in 'Under my thumb', the coke-fuelled adventures downtown in 'Honky Tonk women' or the strung out longing for 'Angie'.

Perhaps the most haunting hymn to romantic failure can be found in 'Wild Horses'. It begins, you will recall,

'Childhood living is easy to do. The things you wanted, I bought them for you.' It turns out that a relationship based on the childish grasping gratification of materialism doesn't last. It associates childhood with childish

self-centredness and the consequent alienation of the other. This is important because, although, as far as we know, Jesus never wrote any songs, He does give it large on the spiritual significance of childhood. If it's important to Jesus then it must be important for us to grasp what He means by it.

First of all it is worth noting that people's experience of childhood is very different. For some it is an idyllic memory. For others it is an unhappy and fraught time. For some, a nightmare. For Jesus Himself it was an extraordinary experience. Rumour (and Holy Scripture) suggest that He had a good mother. His Father was a Mystery and His step-father benevolent and caring. Conceived out of wedlock, born in a barn, a target of state terrorism, He grew up in the refugee camps of a foreign country before returning to the obscurity of a multi-ethnic northern town. So if anyone thinks Jesus glorifies childhood because He sees it through rose-tinted spectacles, think again.

What we need to notice here is that the glorification of childhood is associated with a peculiar set of qualities. In English we have two words with utterly different emphases – 'child-like' & 'childish'.

One is complimentary, the other is most certainly not. The former picks up most readily on what Jesus is talking about.

To use the word 'child-like' is to conjure a picture of a new being. A person in the process of becoming. A sense of constant revelation and learning. An acute dependence on the benevolence of the surrounding world and especially of family. A wide-eyed wonder at the unfolding marvel of all that is. There is no tired over-familiarity, no 'seen it all before'. The schema unfolds without pre-judgement, without prejudice to what is being revealed. But there is no polite social nicety either, no careful response

based on experience or pressure. A child will call it as it is. There is an inbuilt radar for the qualities of authenticity and conviction. The story of the Emperor's new clothes, for instance, relies on just such gifting. Everybody knows the Emperor's new clothes are a confidence trick but either can't say so or have convinced themselves of the lie. The little boy sees what is - a naked man making a fool of himself and instinctively calls him out.

There is an honesty, an integrity, an innocence about childhood that we struggle to recapture the rest of our lives. In order to enter the kingdom, Jesus tells us, it is that childlikeness to which we must return.

Aware of our utter dependence – we do not become complacent, smug or arrogant. Seeing clearly, unblinded by tired and tiresome prejudice, we are able to assess the reality and affirm what is true and what is not.

Having retained or regained our sense of wonder, we can attest the glory of God and have truly thankful hearts.

We return to a lost innocence – not to be confused with naivete – but a simplicity that sees straight through nonsense, hubris and pretence but still seeks the best for the naked fool of the story.

In contrast we review the word 'childish' as being an indicator of something wholly different. It is a word associated with foolishness and immaturity. An obsession with the self. A myopic exclusivity.

When we are born, we enter this world with no concept that there could ever have been a time when we were not or that there is anything more important than us. During those early months (and indeed years) we are dependent. It is, at first a relationship of need. It is utilitarian. How quickly we learn that it is more than that – that it is a relationship of love, that we find our joy and fulfilment in the other. This is the process of maturity. We

learn to respond, inarticulately at first and then with the tool of words. To be childlike is to be constantly growing and maturing in this way. To be 'childish' is to be stuck in that first phase of thinking that 'without me, there is not' and that 'I am the centre of all that is.

'Childishness' is the ultimate spiritual cul de sac, the tedious and corrupting tyranny of self-worship.

'Childlikeness', on the other hand, is the ever joyful and adventurous high road to the Kingdom of God.