

✂ May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight O god, my strength and my redeemer.

Jesus says: 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' (Mark 9: 34). Lines like these make me wonder whether many who claim to be Christians even read the gospels. Imagine Donald Trump's campaign slogan being, "Make America Servant of All... Again" But today's gospel is only a taste of what's to come. In a few weeks you'll hear Jesus say this:

"Those who are highly regarded among the nations lord it over them, officials flex the muscles of their authority, but that is not how it shall be with you. Any one among you who wants to be great, must be your slave. If you want to be the first of all, you must be the slave of all. For this mortal person did not come to have slaves attending on him: he came to be a slave. He came to give his life as a price that bought back multitudes."<sup>1</sup>

Two weeks ago, I said that the Messiah that the Jews were waiting for was a militant one, someone who would overthrow the Romans with a display of power. When Jesus tells us that the first shall be last, he wants to make it very clear that the Kingdom of God, is not in any way like a human kingdom. Equally God's power is not in any way like an inflated version of human power. God's power is incomprehensibly different from human power. And whenever Jesus tells us that he is going to die, or that we must be a servant, he is trying to liberate us from the fantasy that we can expect to know what God's power looks like, based on our own.

So what then are we left with? A child, says Jesus.

We read: "[Jesus] took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Rowan Williams once spoke in a book about how we Westerners consider childhood. As adults, we are tempted, (he says), to forget the importance of play. Children can play in light hearted ways, on the swing in the school playground for example. But their play can also take a darker turn, playing soldiers and experimenting with themes of death and violence. Either way, it is how we begin to make sense of the world. And children need that space to play: to learn what it is to be in control, but also be confident that the adults will protect us from the worst consequences if things go a little wrong. But, in a basic sense, play is activity without any purpose beyond simply

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 10: 42-45, as translated by Rowan Williams

doing and enjoying the activity. It is, in one sense, useless. It doesn't contribute anything to wider society, and it doesn't put bread on the table.

But our society is tempted to see play as mere preparation for adulthood. Children's activity becomes a way to prepare us for doing and achieving later in life. Adult life has come to be defined by the ability to exercise our own free will, and so the task of childhood becomes one of learning to exercise that will – socially, politically, and economically. Working-age adult life has become the fullness of human existence: childhood and old age are, in this view, moments of lesser humanity, of vulnerability. Rowan Williams's book is called 'Lost Icons', the loss of childhood being one of those icons of the fullness of human life. Rowan Williams says that our society has lost sight of our inner child amidst the demands of adult life. There is no space for play when we must be fully independent and self-reliant, and yet also be able to contribute to society.

Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God is for the vulnerable. Not just the sick and disabled, but for children. The kingdom of God is for people who know how to play, and not be too afraid of the consequences. Trusting our parent that he or she will be there for us if something accidentally goes wrong. So as adults, we would do well to learn to play again. To revel in the joy of useless things. Jesus is telling us that we must learn again to be like Adam and Eve, who were created solely to enjoy the Garden of Eden. Those are the things that are eternal, that is what the kingdom of God looks like. So, if Donald Trump is to make America great again, he is to become like a little child.

Perhaps our politicians are doing better than we all assumed they were...