

SERMON NOTES

Second Sunday of Transfiguration

Synaxis Gospel
Matthew 18:10-14

THE LITTLE ONES OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

Following the transfiguration of our Lord, Jesus and His disciples returned to the vicinity of Capernaum. The disciples had been discussing who might be the greatest among them. Aware of this, Jesus gave them an object lesson by taking a little child and setting him before them.

The other gospel writers record that Jesus explained that the greatest must be like that little child. But Matthew adds that Jesus went even further by saying that even to enter the kingdom of heaven one must be converted and become like the little child.¹ Jesus then took the trusting child into His arms. In our reading today, we pick up the discussion which has turned to the value of those who do become like the little child nestled in His arms. Jesus refers to such converts as the “little ones.”

SYNAXIS READING

Matthew 18:10-14

*“See that you do not despise one of these little ones,
for I say unto you, that their angels in heaven
continually behold the face of my Father who is in
heaven.*

*[“For the Son of man has come to save that which
was lost.”]²*

*“What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep,
and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave
the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search
for the one that is straying?”*

¹ The characteristic humility of the little child that the disciples of Jesus must emulate has been discussed in “Tenth Sunday of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (Eve of the Fast of Advent”) and it might be helpful to review that chapter.

² The version quoted, the NASB, notes: “Most ancient mss. Do not contain this verse.”

“And if it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety and nine which have not gone astray.

“Thus it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven, that one of these little ones perish.”

NOTES

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say unto you, that their angels in heaven continually behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.

This verse has often been taken as the foundation for the belief in guardian angels for children. But here, while children who trust in our Lord are certainly included, the idea of the “little ones” extends to all who have become like the little child resting securely in the arms of Jesus that day. Hebrews 1:14 teaches us that the angels are ministering spirits for all those who will inherit salvation.

To “continually behold the face of My Father” simply means that these angels are ever in the Presence of God, even when they are sent out to minister to the “little ones.” One should take care not to look down on those who are so valued by God.

[“For the Son of man has come to save that which was lost.]

Manuscript evidence shows that this verse was not originally a part of Matthew’s Gospel, but has been inserted here by a copyist from Luke 19:10. The truth does fit with the thoughts in these verses that follow here. Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, came into this world from His throne in heaven to die for the sins of His lost humans in order that they might be saved.

“What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains, and go and search for the one that is straying?”

This parable was discussed in “Third Sunday of Great Lent.” Luke placed it with other statements of our Lord to illustrate the kind of joy all those who love God should feel over the repentance of a lost soul. The point that Matthew wishes us to understand here is the preciousness of the little ones to God. Matthew had previously recorded that Jesus condemned those who wickedly try to cause the “little ones” to sin. The parable shows how our Shepherd, represented by “a man,” will seek us when we have strayed away from Him.

It is to be understood that such a loving Shepherd would not leave the ninety-nine unprotected on the mountains, but would have provided for their safety until His return with the one who had strayed.

“And if it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray.

It is not that the ninety-nine are not just as loved. If any one of them had gone astray, His reaction would have been just as joyful upon finding it as well. Actually one should take the ninety-nine as hypothetical, for as Isaiah states: “All of us like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.”³

³ Isaiah 53:6

“Thus it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.”

The parable of the lost sheep and its recovery illustrates the fact that the Father desires His ‘little ones,’—all those who have, with the humility and trust of a little child, become a part of His flock—to be saved from destruction.

APPLICATION

H. H. Aram I called for the year 2008, to be dedicated to Christian education. His Holiness identified Christian education with these words: it is “to show the road leading to the abundant life” of Christ that God offers to us all. The abundant life comes to those who have repented of their sins and turned back to God, with humility and trust. All such become what Jesus has called His “little ones.”

A little Armenian child was recently asked what was the most important thing a child should be taught. The little girl answered, “That God loves us.” And the second, “That He gave His life to save us.” And the third, “That He will forgive us when we truly repent of our sins.” And finally, “That we need never be afraid.” These are words of wisdom and faith from one of the littlest of God’s “little ones.”

The little girl’s answers are addressed by our reading for today. God loves us, and our value to Him can only be measured by the cost of His sacrifice for our sakes. It is not His will that any of us should perish. Therefore, He determined to step down from His glorious throne, laying aside His splendor, to humbly take our form and to die for our sins. With this act, He stripped away every excuse for our separation from Him.

Now, it is up to us to accept or reject this great offer of His love. Acceptance means seeing ourselves for the sinful people that we are, people fallen from the lofty purpose of our creation—the purpose of reflecting His character in all its beauty, of reigning as His cherished kings and queens over this wonderful world. Acceptance means turning from our sins, confessing them to Him and finding the ready forgiveness His sacrifice won for us. It is not so much that we are trying to escape the hell we deserve, but are responding in gratefulness and love to our incomparable God.

Finally, the parable of the shepherd searching in the dark and perilous mountains for a single lost sheep, until he has found it and carried it safely home, sends a message of comfort—that not only has our God assigned bright angels to watch over us, but He Himself searches for us when we stray. We need never be afraid, for we are his “little ones,” and He will hear our cry and carry us to safety.

Though the trials and battles of this life rage around us, in the midst of all that this world hurls at us, may we always be found nestled trustingly in the arms of our loving Savior. That is the abundant life of the “little ones”—safe and secure, cherished and beloved—forever.