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WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON
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“They did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

Nearly everyone has, at some point, hesitated to ask a question, held back by the fear of appearing bothersome, being judged, or exposing ignorance about what they believe they should already know. This reluctance often traces back to childhood or adolescence, when a seemingly simple inquiry may have led to embarrassment or dismissal. Over time, this hesitancy takes root, stifling curiosity and personal growth. What begins as self-doubt can evolve into a deeper fear, despite the undeniable truth that asking questions is essential to our understanding and learning.

In today's passage from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus speaks for the second time of his impending fate: “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” True to his succinct style, Mark leaves out any description of the disciples' reactions—the gasps of shock, the widened eyes, the silence that must have followed. Instead, he offers only a brief statement: “They did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

When Jesus speaks of the suffering that awaits him, he opens a path for his disciples to draw closer to him, inviting them into a deeper understanding of his mission. Yet, they shy away— either because they don't have the courage to admit their ignorance, or because they are unable to bear the truths that might cause them pain. The notion of a suffering, dying Messiah must have confounded them. Perhaps, like so many of us, they believed that evading discomfort would somehow spare them. Or perhaps they recalled the rebuke Peter received at Caesarea Philippi and want to avoid a similar humiliation. Whatever their reasons, their reluctance to ask difficult questions—of themselves, of one another, and of Christ—stifles their growth and limits their communion with God. In their confusion, they turn to quarreling, disputing trivial matters of rank and status. While Jesus foretold his death to reveal a kingdom built on self-sacrifice, the disciples betray their preoccupation with self-aggrandisement.

To help them understand that, in the kingdom of God, the world's understanding of 'greatness' is reversed, Jesus offers his disciples a teaching: "If anyone desires to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." To further explain this truth, he stages a living parable. Taking a child into his arms, he places the child before them and declares, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the One who sent me."

Jesus uses the example of a child not to invite us into innocence or naïveté, but rather to call us to abandon our desires for power and dominance. The child—powerless, vulnerable, without status—is the very one Jesus commands his disciples to welcome. In welcoming those without power, whose voices are ignored in the world, the forgotten, we engage in something far removed from the disciples' arguments about greatness. Indeed, Jesus dismantles human

hierarchies as he takes this small child in his arms – this is a radical new order.

By placing the child at the center, Jesus makes visible a kingdom unlike any other—a kingdom where greatness is redefined, not by self-centered ambition, but by an embrace of those at the margins. If we aspire to true greatness, we must cultivate hospitality towards the vulnerable, those silenced by the world. It is within this embrace, in extending community to the marginalized, that we encounter the very presence of God. To place only ourselves, our closest circle of family and friends, and those like us at the center, is to distance ourselves from the presence of Christ and the One who sent him. In the divine order, power and prestige are not amassed by asserting dominance or chasing recognition. Instead, they are granted to those who embrace humbleness and vulnerability.

Yet, there is even more for us to learn about God in welcoming children. Their presence among us can open us to deeper, more authentic communion—with each other, with Christ, and with God.

Children teach us to honour our imaginations as paths toward God. Their capacity for wonder and creativity is nothing short of extraordinary. In the words of poet William Blake, they can

“See a world in a grain of sand,
And the Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of [their] hand,
And eternity in an hour.”¹

Jesus calls his disciples to this same imaginative leap: to envision a world where death is not the end, where suffering gives way to joy, where resurrection is not just a hope but a promise. But the disciples,

¹ Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

confined by their rigid expectations of the Messiah, struggle to grasp this vision. They cannot imagine the world Jesus presents to them. "Welcome the child," Jesus urges. Open your hearts to wonder once again, to the childlike capacity for awe, and see the world anew.

Children teach us the courage to ask questions as we journey toward God. Their natural curiosity knows no fear, no shame in posing awkward, challenging, or seemingly impossible questions. When something puzzles them, they ask—boldly and without hesitation, persisting in asking until they find understanding.

We, like the disciples, often pretend to have no difficult questions. Yet, life's mysteries persistently elude us. Why do the righteous suffer? Why do humans inflict such cruelty upon one another? Why does evil appear to prevail? If even God's Son was betrayed and killed, what security can anyone claim? Why did God fashion a world so fraught with peril?

Children also reveal to us the essence of divine power. A child, in their helplessness and dependency, embodies powerlessness and need. In many societies, children are socially invisible; in others, they are legally unprotected. Everywhere, children exist at the mercy of those who are older and stronger. And it is this image of vulnerability that Jesus offers as a reflection of God. Do we truly wish to see the face of God? Then let us look to the child abandoned, to the child exploited, hungry, or fleeing from war. Look to the weak, the small, the simple, the vulnerable, and the powerless. Look to the least of these, and behold the face of God.

One of the most extraordinary and humbling truths of Christianity is that God became a helpless human child. In this week's Gospel story, Jesus deepens that mystery by revealing another truth: all children everywhere represent God's heart, God's likeness, God's power. To

welcome a child is to welcome the divine. In God's kingdom, true greatness is found in choosing vulnerability, and in consenting to be little, we discover what it means to be truly great.

If you want to learn how to live with this mystery, welcome the child.