

Now may I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There was before the second world war an archbishop of Canterbury called Cosmo Lang. He was a very quiet, retiring and shy man. And he was very nervous when he made his first trip to America at a time of great moral uncertainty. As he stepped off the plane in New York, he'd been warned about the journalists there and he was met by a bevy of journalists. One of whom shouted out, "archbishop what do you think of the night clubs in New York?"

The archbishop thought he'd replied rather cleverly, batted away and said diffidently, "Oh, are there night clubs in New York?" The next day the headline of the New York Times rang, "Archbishop asks are there night clubs in New York?"

The archbishop was caught asking a question which was the wrong question. Just as the disciples at the start of our gospel reading are asking the wrong question. The disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?", which if you read the gospels, is something of a recurring theme. They're often jostling amongst themselves for position to try and establish a pecking order. And I want to take a few moments to look at Jesus' answer to that question. And it wasn't the kind of answer they were looking for.

Jesus took hold of a child and placed the child amongst them and said this: "Truly I tell you unless you change and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Jesus encourages his disciples to become like children. What does that mean?

My daughter, I don't know why but she gave me a sign recently for my office which said, "You're only young once but you can be immature forever." That's not, I think, what Jesus had in mind when he said this. Being childlike is not the same as being childish. And childlike is also not the same as simply being naïve, although I know that many people

would equate believing in God with the kind of naivete that believes in the tooth fairy or Father Christmas. But I feel that's probably the subject of a different sermon.

Jesus names the childlike quality he's looking for in his disciples. It's humility. He invites the disciples to be humble like this child. There is a humility about childhood which gets lost in later life. Children recognize their dependency. When they're young they can't be fed unless somebody feeds them. They can't get from a to b unless somebody takes them. They know they rely on their parents to look after them. And they expect ... they're expected, they don't expect, they're expected to be obedient. Children are under the authority of adults. So children know a lot about humility.

And as I say, we can lose that. Humility gets harder in adulthood, even for the so-called experts. There was in Russia a very famous rabbi who was lying on his death bed surrounded by three of his closest disciples. They were gnashing their teeth and tearing their clothes at the prospect of him dying, and one said to him "How are we to survive when there is no one to set such an example of piety as you have?" Another said "You are the most learned man in your generation. Who will there be to teach us as brilliantly as you have done?" The third says "You are the most ethical man in the world. Who will be able to teach us ethics as you have done?"

The rabbi listened and then he summoned all his energy for one last breath and said, "And of my humility you have nothing to say?" I feel that story might not be true, but there is in England, or there was, a real man called the Earl of Longford, a well known religious writer, who is quoted as saying this: "In 1969 I published a small book on humility. It was a pioneering work which has not to my knowledge been superseded."

The New Testament presents Jesus as our model for humility. Jesus, though he was born in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave. Being born in human

likeness and being found in human form, Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

That's the example of humility we're called to follow. Jesus became obedient. And obedience seems to be the key element in humility. To be humbled is to set self aside, it's to ask in any situation not what is best for me, but what would God have me do in this situation?

I want to pick up another word from Jesus' response. Note how he says, "...unless you change and become like little children." Humility does not come naturally. I think as I've been saying, we grow out of it. If we're to know the kind of childlike humility Jesus is asking for, then we need to change from our natural adult state. And if we want to know what we need to change from we need to look no further than that epistle from St. James. Twice James mentions in that reading the opposite of humility, which he names as selfish ambition. "For where is envy and selfish ambition" he says, "there will be disorder and wickedness."

The disciples as they jockeyed amongst themselves for the best seats in the kingdom, were acting out of selfish ambition. They were demonstrating the truth of what St. James says. Selfish ambition puts self first. Humility puts others first.

One of my favorite spiritual writers is Henri Nouwen who says this about the conflict which I think is in all of us. "From the beginning of my life..." he says, "two voices have been speaking to me. One saying, 'Henri, be sure to make it on your own. Be sure you become an independent person. Be sure I can be proud of you.' And another voice saying, 'Henri, whatever you are going to do, even if you don't do anything very interesting in the eyes of the world, be sure you stay close to the heart of Jesus. Be sure you stay close to the love of God.'"

That's the change that needs to happen in our hearts. We need to stop listening to the first voice Nouwen mentions and listen more to the second

voice, the voice that puts others first. That leads us to God and keeps us obedient to him.

Before I close I want to clarify that I have nothing against ambition per se. In fact I want us all to be ambitious. There's nothing wrong with ambition. But the question is, what are we ambitious for? What James is critical of is selfish ambition. He's not critical of ambition all together but only that type which is selfish. I reckon it takes an enormous amount of ambition to follow Jesus in the way of the cross, to follow his example. We don't drift into becoming a disciple of Jesus, it's not our natural state. It's something done with intent and resolve. We should be ambitious in our discipleship.

What are you ambitious for? Many of us have reached a stage in life where our ambitions are shifting. In fact, I think all through life, ambitions are shifting. What motivated us 20 or 30 years ago, isn't what motivates us now. Maybe we've achieved all our ambitions. Or maybe we realize if we haven't achieved all our ambitions that we're not gonna make them now.

So what's left? What do we still have to aim for? So I invite you to aim high. Be ambitious. Strive for life's highest calling: To be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Amen.