

God begins small

The picture of today's service shows two girls, lying on a sofa, but upside down. One of my girls used to do that, when she was as old as these two girls. I would find her holding onto her bunk bed, enjoying seeing her room upside down.

We heard how Jesus answered the question from His disciples: 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He replied by turning to a child, putting that child in their midst, and urging them to be like that child.

And so doing what He does, Jesus is turning things upside down here, for His disciples.

I have a book of which the author is a father of three young children. He tells how his experiences as a father show him that, 'God begins small'. And that is exactly what Jesus is doing here, demonstrating that 'God begins small', indeed.

Pieter Both, author of the book, refers to the childhood of the great Church father Augustine. As a boy, Augustine was very difficult for his mother. He was difficult in that he did not know what to do with his life, and therefore he just did nothing. His mother sought support from the local bishop. His advice to her was to let go that worry that became bigger and bigger, while praying for him. The reason why he gave that advice was his belief, that it was impossible that a child that caused the floods of tears as Augustine did, and for whom such deep prayers were said, that such a child would not find its destiny.

Augustine changed, he became a Christian, was baptized and he developed his own thoughts in philosophy and theology. He became the greatest Church father of Christianity and is known as Saint Augustine.

It did take eighteen years though, before Augustine's mother could see that the prophetic words of the bishop were true.

Of course, this is not the way it usually goes with children whom are prayed for. Only a few may become Saints, like Augustine. But the point this father; this writer makes is that it is of crucial importance that parents know they have been given children to make them independent of them, to let them, gradually, go. Learning to let go, but with the deepest awareness that God never lets them go.

An example of a father praying for his children is Job, in its own biblical language.

This is what it says in the book of Job:

There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. ³ He possessed 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. ⁴ His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. ⁵ And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually. (Job 1:1-12)

What this tells us is that, while Job's children continued to do what they did, Job continued to keep them connected with God, through his own connection with God.

Keeping them connected with God, is what you do when you pray for your children. It's the only thing you can do to keep them in God's hands, regardless of what they do or don't do; regardless of what you are able or, are not able to do for them. For worries about children will, as they grow up, be bigger than you can handle yourself. That is when it is of crucial importance to learn to hand such matters over to God.

Perseverance in praying for your children is in fact training in acknowledging that you cannot be in control of how they are going to find their place in life. Praying to God for your child is confessing that your child is first of all His child, with whom He goes His way. It is learning to let them go, where your ability stops to protect them.

At the same time, as we turn back to how Jesus answered the question of his disciples, by taking a child as example, we are urged by Him to bring ourself to God, as His child.

As adults, we have the choice to stay within God's hands, whether we are a parent or not.

And this takes us to our Old Testament reading, where the Psalmist uses the image of a weaned child. It is as if we are given a picture of a two or three year old child. No longer carried in a baby carrier, on its mother's or father's chest. Rather, a toddler sitting on the shoulder of its parent, looking into the world. The baby has grown, moved from drinking milk to eating solid food, a development that has an ongoing impact on the life of the parent; that keeps them on their toes. An ongoing learning process in letting go. Constantly being reminded that as a parent you have carried your child in order to give it more and more space to let it flourish.

Moving further away from you, step by step, to be who they are, out of your sight but never out of their heavenly Father's sight.

Praying for our children, we ourselves need to come to Him as children. To Him who can handle all the things that are too big, too confusing, too entangled to be handled by ourselves. That is what Jesus meant, when He brought in their midst, a child.

There is a saying: When you get entangled in your problems, causing conflicts within you, keep still. God wants you to keep still so that He can disentangle them.

So pray, let go, and do what you can do, while leaving to God what you cannot do.

Dare be small for God, who became small Himself, when He showed Himself in His Son, Jesus Christ, when He was born as a baby.

God begins small indeed.

Amen