

## Heaven is the World Upside Down (Matthew 18: 1-14)

Is there anyone here who does not want to go to heaven when you die? Raise your hand? Anyone? Of course not. Everybody wants to go to heaven and that is astonishing because we know next to nothing about what heaven is like. None of us has ever gone there on vacation and has come back to tell. Even the bible gives us very little information about that wonderful place. Going to heaven is for the most part a stab in the dark, and yet all of us want to go there.

This morning we get to learn a little more about heaven from the mouth of Jesus Christ himself. We get a glimpse into heaven, or as Matthew 18 calls it, into the *kingdom* of heaven. (A better translation of the Greek word *Basileia* would be the *regime*, or the *state or the politics* of heaven. Saint Augustine called it *the City of God*.)

And the central characteristic of heaven is, we learn, that it is *not* like the world we live in and are used to. It is totally different. Life in heaven is the opposite of life on earth. Heaven is the world upside down.

The passage we just read is one of a series of chapters in Matthew . What they have in common is that they all deal with contrasts or opposites. In chapter 16 we have Peter's confession and his rebuke of Jesus. Chapter 17 relates the story of the transfiguration of Jesus and the unbelief and impotence of the disciples. And in this chapter there is the contrast between life in heaven and life on earth.

If that were all this bible passage teaches us, then heaven would remain a mystery. But it also tells us *how* heaven is different from our life on earth.

Here on earth we admire industrial leaders, the CEO's of multinational companies at least those who do not commit fraud. In our world we respect political leaders, presidents, prime ministers and premiers, if they govern well. We honour educational leaders, teachers and professors, but only if they teach well. And we revere ministers of the gospel when they preach well. We call them reverent this and reverent that.

None of these are important in heaven. The only people that count in heaven are little children. Not grownup adults, not young adults, not even teenagers. In the politics of heaven little children matter most, Jesus tells us. Their guardian angels have a direct line to God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. Heaven is child-centered. Heaven is for kids only.

Rembrandt Van Rijn, probably Holland's greatest painter ever, understood this truth. In fact, there is evidence that he based his most famous painting, *The Night Watch*, on this passage from Matthew 18.

This painting depicts the police force of Amsterdam during Rembrandt's time. They were the soldiers who patrolled the streets at night to keep order, to keep watch, They were the *Night Watch*. And they considered themselves very important people. They were notoriously full of themselves. They had commissioned Rembrandt to paint them marching in formation, with drums rolling. "Make a large painting," they said, "make us look impressive."

Instead Rembrandt painted them in disarray, as they came out of the barracks before they had a chance to line up. He painted the keepers of order in a state of disorder. It was his way of poking fun at their puffed up sense of self-importance.

What makes this painting even more famous is his use of the painting technique of *chiaroscuro* which he perfected. *Chiaroscuro* is the use of light and darkness in a painting to make a statement. Whatever is in the light in Rembrandt's paintings is important and what is in darkness is not. Now notice that the person most fully bathed in light is a little girl near the bottom on the left of the painting. That was Rembrandt's way of saying, in the city of Amsterdam The Night Watch may be most important but in the city of God little children take centre stage. In heaven wealth and wisdom, power and status don't count. Heaven is for little children who don't own anything and haven't done anything yet.

Why does Jesus place children in the centre of our attention? I think there are several reasons. The first is that children are in our lives to be protected. Parents have their children for one purpose only: to protect them. Children are in the nature of the case vulnerable. We can easily hurt them, offend them, wound their hearts by what we say, or do, or neglect to do. God wants them to be protected. That is why he puts them centre stage. And he threatens us grownups with dire consequences if we in any way abuse them. When it comes to these little ones God means business. You hurt a child and God will get you for that: drowning with a millstone around your neck or worse.

In this passage Jesus places children centre stage for us because they are vulnerable. But it is clear from the whole bible that he extends that place of honour also to grownup little people, whom the Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper called *de kleine luyden*, who are also easily offended, hurt, maligned: these are the marginalized of society, the homeless, the mentally or psychologically challenged, people on AISH. They need our protection too. Jesus is also deadly serious about his command for us to protect them. Just read the Old Testament.

But now back to today's passage about children. One of the points of the passage is that we have to protect little children, the little ones, or else. If this were Abuse Awareness Sunday, that would be the theme of my meditation.

But it is not, and so I want us to focus on the second reason, which is that children are in our lives as examples of what it is to live the Christian life. We can learn from them how to be a Christian. Healthy, happy children live their lives as if they don't have care in the world. Unlike adults they play at living. If we see a child that acts like an adult we say

“that child is too serious, let her play a little.” The lives of children are carefree and in that way children model the Christian life, which Jesus invites us to live in this bible passage.

Another one of Rembrandt’s productions that underscores this fact is an etching called *Christ Preaching*. In this picture Jesus is speaking and he is saying:

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.....

And he continues on in this vein.

And in this art work everyone in the audience is listening intently to what Jesus is saying, weighing his words carefully, critically as only Dutch Reformed Christians are able to do. All are listening, everyone that is except a little child at the bottom of the etching. She is sprawled in the isle on her belly, playing with some toy, her butt turned to the Lord Jesus. The grownups in this etching are all thinking hard about the lesson in Jesus’ message and how to apply it to their lives. It is all very serious. The child by contrast does not hear a word Jesus is saying but she practices what he preaches. She does not worry. She is too busy playing. She is carefree as every Christian grownup should be. She is experiencing a taste of heaven, a moment of the peace that passes all understanding. She is carefree because she is in the company of Jesus.

Children are at ease in the presence of Jesus because they have the capacity of unquestioned faith. They believe, they trust very easily, totally and without reservation.

By contrast grownups like you and I have great difficulty trusting. We have to work at it. It is hard for us to trust God like a little child. It does not come natural to us. And yet becoming a child in relation to God is absolutely necessary or else we will never make it into heaven says verse 3. We all want to go to heaven when we die, but we won’t even get through the front gate without a childlike faith in God

Why is it so hard for us grown ups to live our lives as children of God? I think it is because, as we go through life we accumulate a lot of *stuff*, for lack of a better word.

What I mean by *stuff* is the accumulation, over a life time, of experience, of knowledge and skill, of university degrees and prominent positions, of status in the community and friends and family and children to love and of money and things, etc. --stuff.

Not that these things, this stuff is inherently bad. It is not bad for us to aim for achievements, or to be proud of our accomplishments, or to be in love with friends and family, or to enjoy the things we own.

The problem arises when we become overly attached to this stuff and we begin to feel that we must protect this stuff at all cost because it is the only thing we can count on.

The problem arises when we become so addicted to this stuff that we lie awake with worry at night for fear of losing it. When this happens, these things become offensive to us Christians, just like our hands and our feet and our eyes Jesus refers to in verse 8 and 9. Get rid of this stuff, Jesus tells us, because it keeps you from living carefree lives as children of God. Give it up for the Lord.

This may be the place in our meditation to mention the problem I have been struggling with for years and years in the courses I have taught and in my own life experience. The problem is this: Why is it that as we grow up and older, we also age? As soon as we are born we begin to grow. We grow in stature, in knowledge, and in strength. We gain life experience. We accumulate stuff.

But simultaneously, also from birth on, there is another opposite process happening in us and to us, we age, we lose things as we get older and the years pass by. The effects of aging become particularly noticeable during the last phase of life, the phase that I am in right now. I no longer have the physical strength and the stamina I had when I was 20, 30, 40. I need glasses to see and hearing aids to hear what you are saying when you talk to me. I have trouble remembering your names and I have to face the possibility that in the not too distant future I may lose my mind and that my walk with the Lord may slow down to a shuffle at best. Is there a purpose to this aging process? Is there any meaning in it?

All of us, sooner or later, experience a reduction in our abilities, a loss of our faculties, of functions. Why is this happening to us in God's good creation? We must not be too quick to give an answer to this question. Because in asking this question we, as with questions about the meaning of disease and death itself we find ourselves on holy ground. I still don't have a clear answer to this question. But I have wondered from time to time, whether by taking away our ability to look after ourselves to the point where others have to nurse us, God is not preparing us to enter heaven. When the Dutch talk about some one who has become senile, they say: "Hij is kinds." "He has become like a child." About the stuff we accumulate over a lifetime we say that you can't take it with you. Maybe, whether we like it or not, we have to rid ourselves of all our stuff and become like a child before we can enter heaven.

It is not always easy for me even today, as old as I am, to live life as a child of God because I am overly dependent/ attached/ addicted to my stuff. I envy brothers and sisters who come what may have a steady, rock bottom conviction that God always comes first and is always there to help them.

The closest I have come to that frame of heart and mind was when I was diagnosed with an especially virile form of cancer some years ago and I had to face the possibility that I might die soon. And the question became pressing for me what good religion does when you are about to die. After a long struggle I was able to formulate the essence of the gospel for me in one sentence: the conviction that God would carry me in his arms on either side of the grave. That knowledge gave me enormous peace inside.

But life goes on. I am cancer-free now and I don't always know by experience what it feels like to be carried like that. At times I am more like a lost sheep than a child of God. It takes the effort of the Good Shepherd to search for me, to find me and to carry me home again, in his arms like his little one, like his child.

But I do know from these intermittent experiences the shape of a life lived as a child of God. I know what it looks like, what it feels like. A life lived as a child of God is based on God's invitation to walk, and some times to dance with him, throughout life and it goes like this:

At birth or at baptism God comes to us and says: Harry, John, Peter, Jenny, or whatever your name is, take my hand and walk with me through the seasons of life, you and me, through childhood, the teenage years, young adulthood, middle age and the later years. And yes, at times you will be dragging your feet because the going is tough. And at the end of your life your walk with me may slow down to a shuffle. But don't let go of my hand because there will also be times when we will dance together.

What hanging on to God's hand means concretely probably differs from person to person and from one season to another. And to spell all this out in detail would take another sermon, one based on Ecclesiastes 3 for example. But I *do* know that when we are able and willing to hang on to the hand of our Father in heaven, whoever we are and whatever the season of life we go through, then the quality of our lives improves and it somehow becomes easier to make it through the rough times..

Here is how I picture God and I walking and dancing together: When our granddaughter Jessyca was 3 or 4, we used to walk through the mall hand in hand. And from time to time she would say: "Opa, let's dance?" And instead of walking we would hop, skip jump for a while, I think the Dutch call that *huppelen* or skipping instead of walking. And then we would laugh and laugh, and not care one wit that other people thought we were crazy. At those times she was an example to me of what it is to be a carefree child. She brought out the little kid in me.

God wants us to walk with him through life, like his little child, our hand firmly lodged in his big hand, safe, secure and carefree. And at times, when the occasion arises, he wants us to dance, to *huppel*, to hop skip with him until the day when we arrive at home to rest.

All it takes to walk and to dance with God as his child is that we let go of our stuff and trust Him unconditionally. We can trust what He says because God never goes back on his Word and he never lets go of our hand. Ask any child. They will tell you.