

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE ~ WITH THE CHILDREN

In spite of all our Lord could do and say, the minds of the Apostles were still full of the coming Kingdom and of the first places there. Whether it was the favour shown to the three who had been taken into the room of Jairus' little daughter when the rest were left outside, and had been with the Master on the Mount, where it was plain they had seen something wonderful and heard some secret which they would not tell the nine; or whether the great promise made to Peter after his confession at Csesarea Philippi had aroused jealousy among the others, there was a dispute among the Twelve at this time as to which of them was the greatest.

Andrew was the first called; James and John were cousins, or, in Jewish language, "brothers" of the Lord; and John was plainly His best beloved. On the other hand, Peter was the most noticed by the Master and was the Rock; Judas came from the south, and spoke the best, and was better off than the rest. Which of them, then, was the greatest? This was the kind of talk among them as they walked one day behind our Lord on the way to Capharnaum. When they came to the house He said quietly:

"What did you speak of in the way?"

"But they held their peace," says St. Mark, "for in the way they had disputed among themselves which of them should be the greatest." At length one bolder than the rest answered the Master's question after a fashion by putting another:

"Who, thinkest Thou, is the greater in the Kingdom of Heaven?" It shows their confidence in our Blessed Lord, and their habit of taking all difficulties to Him, that ashamed as they were of being caught in this dispute, they yet appealed to Him to settle it and to satisfy their curiosity. Our Lord sat down and made them all come round Him. A little child happened to be near. Jesus called him, and, when He had embraced him, He set him in the midst. See the Twelve looking at the child, wondering what was coming and why he was put there.

See the child looking round innocently at them all, standing there at our Lord's knee because he was bid, asking no questions. And Jesus said to them:

"Amen, I say to you unless you be converted and become as little children you shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, he is the greater in the Kingdom of Heaven." What a surprise! They had been disputing about the first place, and He threatens them with not getting in at all unless they change.

Our Blessed Lord goes on to speak of the preciousness of these little ones in the sight of God, of the reward those will have who do them good, and of the terrible punishment those deserve who teach them what is wrong, or neglect or harm them in any way:

"He that shall receive one such little child in My Name receiveth Me. But he that shall scandalize one of these little ones that believe in Me, it were better for him that a millstone should be hanged about his neck and that he should be drowned in the depth of the sea. See that you despise not one of these little ones, for I say to you that their Angels in Heaven always see the face of My Father who is in Heaven."

We must not think that these solemn promises and threats are for grown up people only. They are for children too. Children help or harm one another very much. Wherever they meet—in the playground, in the street, in church, at school, at home, they are doing good or doing mischief, pleasing or displeasing the Good Angels of their brothers, or sisters, or companions.

The Holy Angels watch with the greatest care over the little ones entrusted to them. Happy those who make friends of these blessed spirits by helping their little charges. But woe to any who by word or example harm a little child. Its powerful friend and protector who stands always in the Presence of God will accuse them there.

Children are very dear to our Blessed Lord, and He loves to see them near Him. He was resting one day when some Jewish mothers, who had watched their opportunity, brought a whole flock of little ones, infants in arms many of them, that He might touch them and lay His hands on them and pray.

The Apostles were not at all kind to the visitors and went about rebuking both mothers and children:

"Get away, children," they said, "the Master is tired and cannot do with you. They had soon forgotten the lesson He had given them at Capharnaum and the small teacher He had set over them there. They thought, no doubt, that to be worthy of their Master's attention, all should be important people like themselves. He had to teach them for the second time that they must become like children if they were to be near and dear to Him. A child is—or ought to be—simple and innocent, content to be little, to depend on others, to obey. This is why he is great in God's sight and worthy to be set as an example even to Apostles. Jesus, seeing the children being driven away, was much displeased and said to the Twelve:

"Suffer the little children to come unto Me and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of God."

From these words we see that the children were eager to come to Him, and were not simply brought by others. How gentle and inviting must have been His look that encouraged the little troop to make their way up to Him in spite of the rough ways and words of the Twelve! They clustered round His knees. They held out their arms to be taken into His. They cried out "me! me!" as they saw first one and then another folded in His embrace. They prattled round Him. They nestled on His breast. They took His hand and held it fast. Happy little

children, who shall tell the graces that came to them that day from their Saviour's blessing and caress.