

*The Rev. Steven C. Sterry, M.A./M.B.A.*

*Assisting Priest at the Anglican Church of the Epiphany*

For the past three weeks, we have been focusing on Mark's Gospel, Chapters 9 and 10. Today, for example, his Gospel describes the Pharisees' attempt to entrap Jesus with a question concerning divorce. Jesus, of course, evades the trap by telling them that, while Moses, the man, allowed his people to divorce, in the eyes of God who has joined each couple together in marriage, those who are granted divorces and marry another, are actually guilty of adultery. But then, in verse 13, there is an abrupt change in subject when Mark writes,

13 And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. 14 But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. 15 Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." 16 And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

If we look at last week's Gospel lesson, we see something similar happening. The apostles are upset because somebody was casting out demons in the name of Jesus. Jesus rebukes them and tells them that those who perform deeds in His name are legitimate and should not be prevented from doing so. And then, suddenly, Mark writes in Chapter 9, verse 42,

42 "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.

Finally, the previous Sunday's Gospel from Mark, Chapter 9 describes an argument that the disciples had over who would be the greatest. Then, suddenly the following sentence appears at the end of the reading.

36 And he [Jesus] took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 37 "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.

Today's lesson about divorce also appears in Matthew, Chapter 19. At verse 14, the lesson shifts to a similarly worded discourse on children, saying:

<sup>13</sup> Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, <sup>14</sup> but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me

and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>15</sup> And he laid his hands on them and went away.

In Luke’s Gospel, the good doctor recites the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, and suddenly, in verse 15, the story shifts to what appears to be the same discourse:

Now they were bringing even infants to him [Jesus] that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

It seems logical to conclude that Jesus has a special place in his heart for children. One might logically surmise that their innocence and their vulnerability requires a special degree of protection and consideration. Furthermore, the warnings that are given in these passages seem to carry substantial penalty and are clearly not to be ignored.

The original idea for this sermon began to form after realizing that for the past three weeks, our Gospel readings from Mark have ended with Jesus’ launching into his discourses about children. My curiosity then prodded me to re-read all of these New Testament verses and to seek out others from the parallel Gospels. I had also been observing the current events surrounding the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court of the United States and had been monitoring the Facebook posts of friends and acquaintances from various Episcopal churches in both Los Angeles and Orange Counties. I discovered that, throughout the postings that I read, there seemed to be what I believe is an underlying fear that the Senate Confirmation of Judge Kavanaugh will be followed by the eventual overturn of the *Roe vs. Wade* Supreme Court Decision, which legalizes abortion in the United States.

I began then to wonder about how these specific passages from Mark might provide some insight as to how Jesus felt about children and how He would have reacted to the practice of abortion that seems to be so prevalent in society today. I also received directly from our Diocesan office announcements concerning the 40 Days for Life, which is an End to Abortion Movement, in which myself, Fr. Earle Foxe, now an Anglican Priest of our Diocese in Arizona, and Fr. Richard Avery, our Priest Emeritus participated when we were clergy members together at Blessed Sacrament Episcopal Church in Placentia. A new cycle of this movement just began a few days ago on September 26<sup>th</sup>, and members of this movement spend volunteer hours praying for

and counseling on the sidewalks in front of Planned Parenthood facilities those who might be seeking abortion.

Finally, I read about a workshop at the Diocesan Synod, which takes place at the end of this month and which I plan to attend. It is called *The Need for Life-Affirming Ministry in a Broken Society*. The description of this workshop states, “Abortion and assisted suicide are often seen as political topics that don’t concern the Church, but we know there are people in our pews that are dealing with these issues. So how should the Church try to provide pastoral care to people considering an abortion or hurting afterwards? Can the Church help someone who wants to die? This workshop will seek to answer these questions and provide practical pastoral tools to equip lay and ordained leaders for Life outreach.”

So my first question to you is: can abortion be considered an acceptable means of birth control, and how do you think Jesus would have addressed this subject? In reading the lessons of these past three weeks, I am inclined to answer in the negative. Jesus makes it clear in these passages that God values all human life, especially the children, and I think that includes life in the womb, as well. The Bible also makes it clear, in my opinion, in the following verses, that, even in the womb, we are known to God:

- In John 8: Jesus says to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”
- God tells Jeremiah in Chapter 1: verses 4-5: <sup>4</sup>Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying,  
  
<sup>5</sup>“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”
- The Book of Job, from which we read today, in Chapter 31 verse 15 says,  
<sup>15</sup>Did not he who made me in the womb make him?  
And did not one fashion us in the womb?
- Isaiah 44:2 states  
<sup>2</sup>Thus says the LORD who made you,  
who formed you from the womb and will help you:  
Fear not, O Jacob my servant,  
Jeshurun [which is a poetic name for Israel] whom I have chosen.
- Romans 8:29

<sup>29</sup> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

My second question is: do you think that Jesus would have so forcefully made the statements that we have been reading for the past three weeks if he felt that abortion was a reasonable alternative for one to ever consider in his or her life? I think that the answer is obvious. God values life, whether it be adults, children, infants, or embryos that exist in the womb. If God really created us, then we must also consider the process through which he engineers that creation nothing less than holy.

My first wife, Norma, and I were faced with the potential issue of medically necessary abortion when she became pregnant while she was taking birth control pills. Norma, who passed away in 2002, had Multiple Sclerosis, and her doctors, who prescribed birth control pills, were fearful that her surprise pregnancy might bring about adverse circumstances because her sickness was quickly progressing. I remember that her doctors were trying to push us toward an early abortion, but Norma was willing to stand firm despite the possible exacerbations that her pregnancy might cause. I stood by her decision, and because of God's help, she was able to tolerate her pregnancy and her health actually improved for a couple of years, giving her the time to be a mother to her newborn son. Chris is now grown up, married a Biola graduate and settled his family, including two boys, in Bend, Oregon. He works as an international sales engineer for a computer software company. His wife, Kristi, was recently accepted to the Physician's Assistant program at Yale University, where she will be able to take most of her classes online at home while she and Chris continue to raise their family. There is also a possibility that Chris may be transferred to England, and Kristi would be able to attend classes at Yale's London campus.

Finally, I would like to ask you these questions: are you able and willing to attend the Diocesan Synod, take action in a program like the 40 Days of Life, or reach out to those who may be considering abortion as an option in their life?

Jesus understood the importance of children in His ministry and taught others that they were not only the most vulnerable, but also the most important beings in our lives. He also understood and taught that their innocence qualified them for a special place in His kingdom. Our innocence, on the other hand, can only be achieved by our acceptance of the Grace provided by Jesus Christ through His death and resurrection. It is only through Baptism in Jesus that we can regain that innocence and can be like the little children who he received as He preached his Gospel of love and salvation.