

Homily for Thursday Evening Prayer (October 1)

Text: Philippians 2:1–18

(With reference to the appointed lection from Matthew 18:1–9)

As we gather in the quiet of this evening, we begin by telling the truth about where our feet are planted.

We gather tonight upon the ancestral, traditional, and unceded homelands of Indigenous nations who walked, hunted, farmed, and prayed across this Ohio River valley long before churches like ours raised their steeples: the **Shawnee**, the **Myaamia (Miami)**, the **Wyandot**, the **Lenape (Delaware)**, the **Seneca-Cayuga**, and the ancient peoples of the Adena and Hopewell earthworks whose sacred soil still surrounds us.

We cannot enter into prayer here without remembering that this land bears its own devastating chapter of displacement in what historians have recorded as Ohio's "Other Trail of Tears." Under the calculated machinery of removal and relentless settler pressure, entire families were uprooted and driven from these fertile valleys. Elders, nursing mothers, and little children were forced onto river steamboats and overland marches west into Kansas and Oklahoma. Many did not survive the journey.

I tell you this because just across the northern border, yesterday—September 30th—marked Orange Shirt Day, the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. We hold in our hearts the thousands upon thousands of Indigenous children who were systematically torn from their homes to be placed in residential boarding schools run by church and state—schools where thousands died of neglect, illness, and abuse, never returning home to the arms of their parents. Genocide... We committed Genocide.

Whether on the removal routes marching out of Ohio or in the cold dormitories of residential schools, the imperial mindset was identical: the powerful looked upon the small, the vulnerable, and the native inhabitants of this earth and saw them not as bearers of the holy image of God, but as obstacles to clear, bodies to discipline, and lives to discard.

It is with that heavy, honest truth ringing in our ears that we mark the feast of Thérèse of Lisieux this evening. We often sentimentalize her 'Little Way' just as we sentimentalize childhood—reducing her to cloistered sweetness and showerings of roses. But at its heart, Thérèse's path was an austere, radical refusal to climb. She understood that in the kingdom, smallness is not a soft aesthetic; it is an eviction of ego, a refusal to participate in the machinery of dominance.

That insight leads us straight into the gospel appointed for this day that normally would be read from Matthew chapter 18.

In that reading, the disciples approach Jesus with a raw, worldly ambition. They ask: 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'

They want an organizational hierarchy. They want rank, precedence, and titles. They are asking who sits at the right hand of power when God finally takes the throne.

And Jesus doesn't answer with an abstract theology lecture, but with a living scandal. He reaches into the crowd, pulls a child into the absolute centre of the room, and says: *"Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* Then he delivers one of the most chilling, uncompromising warnings in all of Holy Scripture: *"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones... it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea."*

We hear "become like children" in modern pews and sentimentalize it. We think of innocent play, sweet Sunday school portraits, and untroubled trust. We think of pure, cute, innocent, and lovable as fitting descriptions. We think sweet things and goo goos and ga ga's and laughter and play.

That is not what a child was in first-century Judea, and it is certainly not what a child was in imperial Rome.

In the ancient Roman world, a child had zero legal standing, zero rights, and zero social capital. Under the absolute power of the *patria potestas*, a father held the legal authority of life and death. Infants who were frail, female, or simply inconvenient were routinely exposed on hillsides or discarded on city rubbish heaps. Children occupied the absolute bottom of the social hierarchy alongside enslaved persons. They were treated as chattel, easily replaced, and subjected to the most

perverse and predatory whims of the powerful, which if we are being frank, seems to be all too real in today's world. The historical reality of the Pax Romana was that vulnerable children were commodified, abused, and sexually exploited by men of status with total impunity. It was expected. It was built into the depths of society and understanding.

To be a child in the empire was to be completely unprotected, completely commodified, and utterly dependent.

So when Jesus takes a child and places them in the centre, he is not asking his followers to be naive. He is commanding them to **divest from status**. He sets before them someone who has no power to return a favour, no social leverage, and no defence, and he says: *This is what the Kingdom looks like*. God stands fiercely, unconditionally with the one who cannot defend themselves.

This radical subversion of power brings us directly into our reading tonight from Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Paul writes from a prison cell to a Roman colony—a city profoundly proud of its imperial citizenship, its military honours, and its ladders of influence. And into that culture of upward climbing, Paul drops this plea:

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves... Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

Then Paul recites that ancient hymn of self-emptying—the *kenosis*:

“Who, though he was 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... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

Here is the ultimate divine subversion.

Empires believe that power means conquest, extraction, and dominating those beneath your feet. Systems survive by accumulating leverage. Jesus died because he was a political threat to this system itself.

Jesus reveals that God moves in the exact opposite direction. Christ does not exploit divinity. He empties his hands. He walks down the ladder—past the rulers, past the respectable, down to the status of a servant, down into the agony of an imperial execution. ***He reaches the children, meeting them at the very bottom of society, and in that holy presence with the lowest and most vulnerable, the kingdom of God is fully revealed.***

And then Paul challenges us: *“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling... so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars.”*

Hear those words afresh tonight: **Children of God.**

Does this context change what those words mean for you?

Because we do not have to look only to ancient Rome to see a crooked and perverse generation. We see it throughout history, and we see it in our own headlines. We see it in the children who were tossed into rivers and left in unmarked soil in Canada and the US; in babies pushed down into wells and forgotten by institutions sworn to holy vows in Ireland; in children trapped in networks of human trafficking across the world; in the elite corridors of wealth and power exposed by scandals like Jeffrey Epstein, where the rich and connected preyed upon young, vulnerable bodies, confident that prestige and silence would protect them.

We cannot look upon these horrors and pretend they belong to another age or another people. We are standing in the middle of this story, and we are responsible.

When society protects wealth over innocence, we are complicit if we remain silent. When institutions protect their reputations instead of the victims crying out at their gates, the Church has chosen the empire over Christ. It is up to us to stop it. It is up to us to refuse the silence, to tear down the stumbling blocks, and to build communities where the predatory cannot hide.

To be a **child of God** is not a comfortable title. It means we voluntarily resign from the pursuit of power, status, and self-preservation. It means we step down into

radical solidarity with those the world exploits and discards. It means we empty our hands as Christ did, that justice might finally roll down. We are to become like the children.

As night falls, let us take on the mind of Christ—the mind that bends low, the mind that protects the little ones, and the love that holds the vulnerable in the very centre.

Let us listen to a brief clip of the song 'Remember Me' by Fawn Wood, holding in our hearts the memory of every child who never returned. As we listen, let us acknowledge the thousands of infants and children resting beneath our feet—even here on this farm in Ohio—whose lives were lost to the violence of empire, settlement, and residential schools.

(Audio clip plays)

In that spirit of remembrance, lament, and commitment, let us pray:

**God of our Ancestors, who holds the spirits of the forgotten,
Remembering the children of every age—from ancient empires to residential
schools—we grieve the lives lost and the silence imposed.
Help us to divest from power, to become like children at the bottom of society,
and to stand fiercely with the vulnerable.
Guide our hearts from lament to true reconciliation, that justice may roll down
and a new path may begin.
Amen.**