

## *Revealed to Infants*

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Church of the Ascension Chicago

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*At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." - Matthew 11:25-30*

The most impressive theologian I know personally is a man named Mark McIntosh, a fellow priest with degrees from Yale, Oxford and the University of Chicago. He served as Canon Theologian to Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold, then ministered alongside Justin Welby, now Arch-bishop of Canterbury, at Durham Cathedral, and in 2014 was asked by Loyola University, Chicago, to fill a newly formed theology department faculty post devoted to Christian Spirituality.

Whenever I've spent time with Mark over the years, I'm always in awe of his erudition. Even more, though, I sense his love for and his companionship with Christ. I come away thinking, "*Here is someone who seems to directly experience the mercy and love of God.*"

In one of his first books, Mark McIntosh laments the professionalization of theology in our time, the confinement of theology to the academy, the divorce of theology from our basic human questions about the meaning of life, the dilemma of death, love, forgiveness, justice and injustice. It's as if theologians now think and write and converse with one another in black and white, he suggests in the opening pages, while all of humanity is dying to see in color, to richly and meaningfully connect thought and experience.

This scarcity of ground-level theology and the divorce of theology from the actual lives of so many people was also a concern of Jesus of Nazareth. Listen to today's text from Matthew, as Jesus prays, thanking God his "*Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants...*"

In readings over the past few Sundays, Jesus had issued cautions to the disciples, now authorized to share in his mission. *You'll be misunderstood, hated and dragged before councils.* And then, immediately before today's text, we are given an update on John the Baptist and his imprisonment. Jesus laments the impenetrability of the human heart. Why, he wonders, has John's unmistakably holy and clear message of repentance mostly fallen on deaf ears?

All of this is the backdrop for the prayer of Jesus that begins today's text. So few people have truly understood and responded to John's message of repentance. And then there's the growing professional resistance to his own mission and ministry and message, the contempt of the credentialed scholars and the religious company men whose hard-earned authority and turf are now threatened, those whom Jesus sarcastically describes here as the '*wise and intelligent.*'

With regard to those he calls 'infants,' Jesus does not intend the term literally. He is giving thanks for all, of any age or circumstance, who show a capacity for learning something new, those able to approach each new day with wonder, those whose curiosity hasn't been snuffed out by shame, though as well capable of genuine repentance, those for whom asking uncomfortable questions is a given, those for whom divine signs and miracles are an appreciatively anticipated part of today.

I suppose I might say that my experience of Mark McIntosh leads me to imagine he is one of the 'infants' Jesus has in mind here. I gather you have also known a few similar, rare, extraordinary souls.

This may be a good place to recall that I last saw Mark McIntosh at a gathering for his 60th birthday, in early March of this year, just a week or so before stay-at-home conditions went into effect. A few years ago, Mark was diagnosed with ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease. By now, he's lost all motor control, except that he can move his neck enough to take every other breath from an oxygen tube attached to his hi-tech wheelchair; and he can talk. Mark wanted me to know about his latest book, a weighty theological tome, just published and sitting nearby on a coffee table. And then he told me about the next book he has in mind and heart.

As we spoke, I was distracted by the compromises in Mark's body. But what seemed intact to me was what Jesus may see as the 'infant' in Mark, the Light of Christ in his eyes that I have always seen from my first meeting of him, the familiar sense that he knows it is only by God's grace that he will live another day, take his next breath, find the grace to wonder and forgive and hope and love, and maybe even write another book.

I've been blessed to see this same infant-wonder in many at Ascension in my years here, including most recently in many of the young adults who have taken part here in the past few years. I've been blessed and challenged by their curiosity, their willingness to put the questions and dilemmas of their lives out in plain sight, their wondering if and how God will be revealed to them, here in our worship and fellowship and out there in the worlds of their lives.

One of those young adults is Noah Riegenbach. In recent weeks, he's had a number of conversations with Ascension members and newcomers about the meeting places of theology and faith and life. He will be joining us at 11 this morning, at our virtual coffee hour, to take these conversations a bit farther, and to ask us where these conversations may lead us in the coming year and beyond. I've also invited Noah to take a moment now to introduce himself, share a brief reflection, and conclude the homily.

And I'll now ask our Zoom host to give Noah the spotlight as he greets us...