

TANGAZA COLLEGE
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA

**THE SYMBOL OF 'CHILDREN' IN THE GOSPEL OF
MATTHEW:
A CALL FOR CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN AFRICA
TODAY**

By
CHOTA TRESFORD, SDB

Supervisor
Sr. CARMEL POWELL, FMM

February 2002

Nairobi- Kenya

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A Long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfilment
of the Requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies

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STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay (thesis) is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts Degree in Religious Studies. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.


Signed:

.....


CHOTA TRESFORD, SDB.

This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

Signed:

.....

SR. CARMEL POWELL, FMM.
(SUPERVISOR)

Dedication

I dedicate this work to:

- The Chota family who have been supportive in many ways.
- The Catholic Church in Zambia.
- The Christians of St Marys Parish, Mukuru Kwanjenga-Nairobi.
- All who have been my teachers in one way or another.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABD	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
BTB	<i>Bible Theology Bulletin</i>
CBQ	<i>The Catholic Bible Quarterly</i>
NJBC	<i>The New Jerome Biblical Commentary</i>
Cf	<i>Confer; compare</i>
Ibid	<i>The source is the same as the footnote immediately Preceding it (Ibidem)</i>

Gen	<i>Genesis</i>
Exod	<i>Exodus</i>
Deut	<i>Deuteronomy</i>
Job	<i>Job</i>
Jdt	<i>Judith</i>
Dan	<i>Daniel</i>
Sam	<i>Samuel</i>
Kgs	<i>Kings</i>
Psalms	<i>Psalms</i>
Prov	<i>Proverbs</i>
Sir	<i>Sirach</i>
Tob	<i>Tobit</i>
Isaiah	<i>Isaiah</i>
Jer	<i>Jeremiah</i>
Hos	<i>Hosea</i>
Zech	<i>Zechariah</i>
Esd	<i>Esdra</i>
Matt	<i>Matthew</i>
Mark	<i>Mark</i>
Luke	<i>Luke</i>
1 Cor	<i>1 Corinthians</i>

General Introduction

What do children symbolize in the Gospel of Matthew that calls for a Christian witness in Africa today? Generally, the three synoptic Gospels have made use of the symbol of children to communicate their message in a particular context. Unlike the two other synoptic Gospels, Matthew treats the children in a special way. Matthew's Gospel is the only Good News that talks directly about church affairs. The **children**¹ are the symbol of Christ's followers in Matthew's ecclesiastical life. In view of this, I have preferred to take the theme of **children** in the Gospel of Matthew, rather than in Mark and Luke, as I am addressing issues in the African Church.

In Matthew's Gospel, **children** are the symbol of disciples who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The symbol of a **child** has a great challenge for our Christian living, especially in Africa. Many people are yearning to be great, according to the worldly standard of greatness, and are fighting for power. In this paper **children** in the Gospel of Matthew have been used to counteract the world's notion of greatness which states that "Might is great". Nevertheless, the symbol of the child demands us to do exactly the opposite: "Humility is great". The presence of a child among the disciples of Jesus is a living parable of Jesus that contains the reversal of values: the mighty is no longer great but the lowly. Thus, a child is taken as the symbol and a standard of what every Christian ought to be. Taking a child as a standard for imitation would have provoked many questions in the community of Matthew, just as it sounds ridiculous to many African ears today. What value does a child possess to be admired and imitated by the elders?²

As the title suggests, my commitment, my intention in this paper is to journey through the Gospel of Matthew and search for the symbolism of the children, in view of challenging the African church today. I am compelled to dig deeper into this Gospel (of Matthew) in relation to

¹ The words in bold: **children**, **child** and **little ones**; in this paper have been used symbolically or metaphorically particularly when they refer to my topic

the situation of our beloved African Church. Certainly, my task in this paper is not to offer a solution to the problems facing Christians in the African Church but to let people examine their Christian witness in line with the symbol of **children**. To bring out the message that is contained in the symbol of **children**, I have analyzed exegetically most of the texts that contain 'children' in the Gospel of Matthew. I am not doing textual criticism or form criticism on the texts but textual analysis, for I am not interested in all the details found in the texts with **children**. My interest is in the symbol of the word **child** or **little one**. Only in some few texts, I have had recourse to the parallel in Mark. I have left out Luke purposely, for Luke and Matthew had access to Mark's material, as it is believed. I have made an overview of the whole Gospel of Matthew, investigating the symbolism of the **children**. The symbol of **children** is mostly employed in Matthew 11:25; 18:1-10,14; and 19:13-14³, which have been analyzed in detail in the second chapter of this paper.

The paper has three Chapters, with General Introduction and Conclusion. Each Chapter has its own short introduction and conclusion. Chapter one contains the theme of **children** in the Hebrew Scriptures. This is because Matthew has written to show that Jesus is the Messiah who has come to fulfill the Hebrew Scriptures. In addition, in Chapter one I have considered the children in the New Testament world in which Jesus delivered his message. Besides that, in the same Chapter I have given different terminologies about children to highlight the symbolism of **children** in Matthew's Gospel. The first Chapter sets the stage for the exegetical work found in the second one, which stands as the backbone of the whole paper. Furthermore, Chapter two comprises sub-topics that bring out the theology of Matthew. Chapter three is an attempt to contextualize the message contained in the symbol of **children** in our contemporary African

³ This problem will be addressed later

situation. Since we are all children of God, the message concerns all of us. But I have decided to apply it in three areas of our Christian living: the Small Christian Community, religious life and priestly life.

Lastly, we should note that all the Biblical quotations cited in this paper are taken from the Revised Standard Version English Bible.

³ 1:18 γαστήρ is used for child, 2:2,7-9,; 2:10; 11:16; 21:16; 18:4-5;19:13 have used παιδίου, and 18:6 uses the word μικρόν while 11:25 has used νήπιος. Although I have used so many texts my focus is on the three written above. For more information, check the appendix at the end of this paper.

Chapter I

Children in the Scriptures

1.1 Introduction

There is a statement, which says: "A society can be measured by the way it deals with its children."⁴ Thus, by journeying through the scripture stories about children we shall be led into the perception of the significance of children in the Jewish and Christian societies. The meaning attached to the presence of a **child** and **little one** differs slightly within the two worlds. Nonetheless, they somehow both portray the same meaning whereby a child stands out as a channel in which God operates in a way contrary to human thinking or expectation. Actually, we shall see that it is not easy to be a **child** in a Jewish or Christian environment, just as it is not easy to be a child of God as well. Despite being so, it has its blessing and gifts that point to the presence of God in a challenging manner. One may not understand why God chooses to manifest himself in people whom the society regards insignificant, especially in patriarchal communities.

1.2 Children in Hebrew Scriptures

Hebrew scriptures give us a story of the salvation history of the people of God who perceive themselves as **children** of God. Being children of God, they have a special relationship with YHWH through the covenant. The covenant binds the people of Israel including the future generation foreseen in their children. Regardless of age, all the people of God bear the identity and role of child in relation to God. Preeminently, the King is "adopted" as son of God at his enthronement (Psalm 2:7; 89; 2 Sam 7:14). Nevertheless, the whole of Israel can be termed as a child and God's "son" (Exod 4:22-23; Hos 11:1; Deut 1:31). The child as metaphor for the

⁴Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Beginning of the Gospel Vol. 2* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), p.80.

relation to their God is obviously a relational term, but it is not age specific. Surely it points to such qualities as dependence upon God, reliance upon divine protection, and assurance of divine care and love.⁵ Thus, there is a close connection of children to the people, the covenant, and God in Israel that promised to endure forever. The children of Israel are children of God – the children of the promise and the children of the covenant.⁶ In this way the children stand out as a reminder of the covenant between God and his people. The children manifest God's greatest gift and guarantee of the covenant with Israel. It follows that the presence of children in Jewish families symbolizes God's presence. Therefore, in Hebrew Scriptures children are a gift from God, instruments of God's activity, and symbolically a guarantee of the covenant between God and people.⁷

By making the covenant with YHWH, the people of Israel made a promise to be faithful to God's commandments rooted in the Torah. By the fact that the children are related to the covenant, in this regard they become the present and visible reminder of the Torah to the people. One may ask, "Can this be the reason that the New Testament presents children as a model or image for the believers to emulate, as we shall see later?" Probably, it suggests so. All in all, the practice of the Torah in Jewish communities and in their children's lives is part of their own relationship with God.⁸ This shows that the generation of Israel as people of God see in the children special gift from God that gives hope, as McKenna asserts: "Generations of Jews have looked upon their children with faith, with delight, and with hope."⁹ It is no wonder that children were also important in worship, prayer, and rituals (Deut 4:9; 6:7, Exod 13:8,14).

⁵ John T. Carroll, "Children in the Bible" *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* Vol. 55, No 2 (2001), April, p. 123.

⁶ Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected Stories from the Bible* (Mary Knoll: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 66

⁷ David N. Freedman ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary Vol. 1* (New York: Doubleday), 1992.

⁸ McKenna, p. 66.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 66.

It is believed in many ancient cultures that marriage with children is a blessing. Above all, in Israel a child born outside marriage is regarded as illegitimate. This is because marriage itself is necessary for the production of legitimate children with particular rights of the family that concerns property inheritance. It seems that only legitimate children are expected to participate in an inheritance, though at times Jewish law is kind to illegitimate children, as shown in the story of Abraham and Sarah: God said to Abraham, "... do as she (Sarah) tells you, for through your descendents be named. And I will make a nation of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring" (Gen 21:10-13). The notion of inheritance gives a sense of future hope of the family. The creation account in the book of Genesis sheds light on this issue: that is, the first woman was called Eve, because she was the mother of all the living and source of hope for the fallen first parents.¹⁰

Naturally, there is a strong bond between the parents and their children, in the sense that the children give meaning to the existence of the parents. If this is true, the death of the child takes away the future hope and joy of the parents as we hear from Jeremiah's poem announcing the return, the comforting of Rachel, mother of Israel, symbolizes that new society.¹¹ The poem depicts Rachel's weeping bitterly for her lost children as the scripture reads: Like any mother who loses her children, "she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more" (Jer 31:15). The shattered hope of Rachel returned upon hearing that her children are not dead, but that they shall come back from the land of the enemy: "There is hope for the future, says the Lord" (Jer 31:116-17). It is not by chance that the similar words of prophet Jeremiah resound in the Gospel of Matthew, presenting Jesus as the future hope of the people of God and the

¹⁰ Freedman, p.904.

¹¹ Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe eds., *Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992), p 176

consolation of Rachel: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refuses to be consoled for they were no more" (Matt 2:18).

Regarding the primacy of children in the Jewish family, a favorite image was that of father, mother, and numerous children in the presence of the parents, as the Psalmist acclaims: "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine with your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Lo, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord" (Psalm 128:3). Another point to bear in mind is that besides the children being olive shoots, as we have seen, they are also the carriers of parents' names: "The angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and in them let my name be perpetuated, and the name of my father Abraham and Isaac; and let in them grow a multitude in the midst of the earth" (Gen 48:16). But we can ask, what about those who had no offspring? Accordingly, when there were no offspring, the levirate law provided for carrying on the name of the family and for continuity, through the nearest relative, as Deuteronomy 25:5-10 describes: ... the wife of the deceased person would say, "My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his name Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband to me". In Scripture, says Carroll: "Children represent divine blessing and are celebrated as bearers of name, and therefore the future, of family or people."¹² It is an offence to refuse to carry the duty of perpetuating the name of your close relative. Thus, the children are the means for transmitting the family names. The children did not belong to the family only but also to the entire society, as Freedman states: "In the Bible and early Jewish world, the child was seen not as an individual, but belonged first to the community, and when the parents had a boy circumcised they fulfilled their duty to the community."¹³ In addition to that, there is another strong understanding of children in the Jewish community that they are a communal heritage and gift in

¹² Carroll, p. 121.

¹³ Freedman, p. 904.

the sense that they belong to the people and to God as much as they belong to any one family or set of parents.¹⁴

In accordance with the Jewish tradition, parents or elders have the responsibility of uttering blessings upon the children. Usually parents give blessings to their children before parents die, as reported in the book of Genesis, in the following words: And when the time drew near that Israel (Jacob) must die, he called his son Joseph . . . and Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me," And he said, "Bring them to me, I pray you, that I may bless them" (Gen 47:29; 48:9).

Despite the special esteem for children, they were powerless ones on the bottom rung of Hebrew and other ancient societies. In fact, tradition and custom allotted the most important place to older people.¹⁵ This reality reflects nicely in Wisdom Literatures as the book of Proverbs reads: "A hoary head is a crown of glory"(Prov 16:31), and also, Job in another way says: "Wisdom is with the age, and understanding in length of days"(Job 12:12). Because the children belonged to the parents and had no right on their own, as already mentioned, parents had almost absolute authority over children, who were educated through strict obedience often enforced by severe physical punishment.¹⁶ The book of Proverbs sheds more light on this issue as it instructs: "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" (Prov 13:24). To punish a child presupposes that they are not innocent in most cases, but offensive. But how can we reconcile this with the common understanding that children are innocent? If one goes through the book of Psalms, one will discover that like others, the child was a sinner from birth

¹⁴ LaVerdiere, p 86

¹⁵ McKenna, p 66

¹⁶ (Cf Discipline your son while there is hope; do not set your heart on destruction [Prov 19:18], Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him [Prov 22:15]; Do not withhold discipline from a child, if you beat him a rod, he will not die[Prov 23:13].

and shared in the sins of the community.¹⁷ The Psalmist cried out to God: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:5). There is an opinion that the child shares in social sins but, unlike the adult, who was a great sinner, one would say, the child growing up was just a little sinner, taking part as a child in the way people oppressed one another.¹⁸ I presume in this circumstance children could be quite senseless, unruly, and easily deceived, as scripture says, "... they were deceived like foolish babes. Therefore, as to thoughtless children, thou didst send thy judgment to mock them" (Wis 12:24-25). Probably these are the children Jesus refers as the generation of this age mentioned in Matthew 11:16. He says, "But to what do I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to playmates."

The Hebrew Scriptures have presented many instances in which God acts in an amazing way through children and young people, contrary to the human way of thinking. For instance, we know that wisdom is possessed by old people and not young ones, but God grants wisdom even to little ones. For example, in the book of Genesis a young man by the name of Joseph received the gift of interpreting dreams, as Pharaoh said to him, "Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discreet and wise as you are" (Gen 41:39). Also in the book of Kings the child Solomon requested God for wisdom: Solomon said, "... And now, O Lord my God, thou hast made thy servant in place of David my father, although I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in ... Give thy servant therefore an understanding mind to govern thy people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to govern thy great people" (1Kgs3:6-9). Furthermore the Psalmist uplifts the image of children by showing that it is not the old in age that sees the wonders of God in creation but the little children who perceive and praise God for his wonderful of creation: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth! Thou

¹⁷ LaVerdiere, p. 86.

whose glory above the heavens is chanted by the mouths of babes and infants, thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes to still the enemy and the avenger" (Psalm 8:1-2).

In most cases, in the young and little ones God performs extraordinary things in an ordinary way. Normally, it is the firstborn child who deserves honor or favor, but God does things the other way round; the young and little receive the favor. For instance, he gives favor not to Cain the firstborn son of the human race but to the younger Abel. Genesis reads: And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard (Gen 4:4-5). Another interesting story is that of Jacob and the two sons of Joseph, Manasseh and Ephraim (Gen 49:13-20). Acting in a human way, Joseph desired his father Jacob's special blessing for his older son Manasseh. On the contrary, Jacob pronounces his blessing over Ephraim that was intended for the firstborn. The natural hierarchy has been turned upside down. Failure to understand this, Joseph said to his father, "Not so, my father; for this one is the firstborn; put your right hand upon his head" (Gen 48:18). Poor Joseph, he very much respected the natural hierarchy by putting Manasseh, the oldest, on the right hand of his father and Ephraim on his left¹⁹.

Apart from what we have seen about the children, the image of a child plays an important role in messianic expectations. The prophet Isaiah gave hope to Israel by announcing a future child of David's line to be the hope of God's people despite much suffering. The prophet announces, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). The same prophet describes the future restoration of Israel in terms of idyllic return to the childlike innocence of Eden.²⁰ On this basis, the prophet prophesied: "The suckling child shall put his hand on the

¹⁸ Ibid, p 86

¹⁹ Wim Weren, "Children in Matthew" *A Journal of Bible and Theology*, Vol. 29, No 1-4, (1975), p. 61.

²⁰ Freedman, p. 904.

adder's den" (Isaiah 11:8). Similarly, prophet Zechariah saw a messianic age as a time of peace and joy when 'the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in them' as it reads: Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets (Zech 8:4-5).

1. 3 Children in the New Testament World

What position did the children occupy in the Christian era? As we know, in the first century Christianity started as a small group in the Mediterranean region within the Roman emperor. At that time, the entire cultural system was structured in favor of men. It was constitutively patriarchal. That is, the patriarchal form of household, especially in areas under the influence of Rome, served as the foundation and reinforcement for the patriarchy of the empire itself.²¹ This environment, the behavior patterns of man to man and man to woman, were graded and fixed, immobile within various ranks.²² One may think that the children are left out in the grading of behavior pattern. They are left out for they were considered to fall under the category of women as it reflects in the Gospel of Matthew 14:21: "And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides woman and children." This notion presupposes that woman and children are equal. Probably, today this can be regarded as insult against women. As a matter of fact, children were not put on the same level with women, simply because from the time of birth a child depends more on the mother than on the father. As a consequence, in the Roman law, children had neither independent status nor rights²³. The patterns of family life over centuries and across various cultures were multiform and therefore, the roles assumed by children could not

²¹ Michael Crosby *House of Disciples* (MaryKnoll: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 26.

²² *Ibid*, p. 26.

easily be described, even if our sources for family life in the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds were not as sketchy as they are.²⁴ This may suggest why in Matthew's ideal community, as we shall see later, a new kind of status was envisioned in which all would depend on one another.

At the beginning of the Christian era, the description of the birth and childhood of notable personages was always based on the adult status and roles held by that person. Since children had no status in this regard, it was believed that personality never changed and that a child was something like a miniature adult.²⁵ It is no wonder that in many tribes in and outside Palestine, the place of the child was marked and fixed within the community. These cultures see a child not as an individual with rights but as part of the community, fitting at the bottom of society²⁶. Even in the place of worship, the children aged between eight and twelve had their own place for instruction in the Jewish traditions and laws. Reflecting on the words of St Luke, Pope John Paul II writes, "When Jesus was 12 years old he went for the first time with Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. There in the crowds of pilgrims, he was separated from his parents and, with other boys and girls of his own age, he stopped to listen to the teachers in the temple, for a sort of catechism lesson."²⁷

The separation of children from the parents at the age of 12 was a beginning of a process of entering into adulthood. The transition was social rather than psychological, that is, for boys from the world of women to the world of men, for girls from the paternal house to the husband²⁸. This structure was maintained by letting every person identify himself/herself with the men who are the first in the ranking system followed by women, children and slaves respectively.

²⁴ Ibid, p 120.

²⁴ Canoll, p 121.

²⁵ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh eds., *Social- Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 272.

²⁶ McKenna, p. 66.

²⁷ John Paul II, *Encyclical: Letter of the Pope to Children in the Year of the Family*, (1994,) December, p. 3

²⁸ Malina, p 272

Regarding the position of children in the society, some biblical scholars have the opinion that to some extent a child was on same level with the slave. This is because in Aramaic the word for **child** and **servant/slave** is the same.²⁹ This does not mean that children in the family had equal value to the slaves. The children were loved by the parents and seen as valuable, especially that they are potential adults on whom the future generation depends. Moreover, children were valued primarily for their future contributions as adults. Grown up children would not only assume their productive roles within the socio-economic and political systems but also, closer to home, support their parents in old age and attend to their burial. Despite its positive role of service, childhood in itself was regarded as a stage of immaturity, ignorance, and deficient reason; therefore, education plays a critical role in molding a person for adulthood.³⁰

1.4 Terminologies of Children in Matthew's Gospel

What is the significance of the term **child** in Matthew? To understand the mind of Matthew in our subject matter it is good to trace the meaning of the word **child** which is usually taken for granted when one reads the New Testament from an English translation in which the word 'child' is a univocal term. Nevertheless, the word **child** is rendered by different terms in the Greek text, such as *παιδίον*, *παῖς*, *τέκνον* and *νήπιος*. In a number of texts, it denotes real children. "Who are these children?" we may ask. They form a vulnerable group, which is dependent on the care of parents (7:11); the dark side of it is that they are involved in the miserable circumstances of their parents (18:25) or become the victims of negative options on the part of adults (2:16-18; 27:24).³¹ The word *νήπιος* denotes infants, and is a metaphor for the

²⁹ McKenna, p. 66

³⁰ Carroll, p. 122.

³¹ Weren, p. 61.

lowly and teachable, the beginner and pilgrim. Frequently it denotes the vulnerable child, physically endangered by war, capable of being deceived of wrong action and foolishness.³²

If we have recourse to the Greek meaning of the term **child**, with the help of the New Testament dictionary, we shall find the following meanings:

The little one, *νήπιος*, means the young child, considered a weak and defenseless human being, not yet making use of reason.

The Greek word *βρέφος* more precisely designated the child/infant at its mother's breast, one who feeds on milk, which Luke saw in the children brought to Jesus (Luke 15:3-7).

τέκνον: the child, in the sense of a boy or a girl, one used in the parable of two sons (Matt 21:28-32). *τέκνον* is derived from the word *τίκτω*, meaning to beget. He/she remained in affective relationship with his/her parents, who were to show him tenderness and might expect obedience from him.

The little one, Greek: *παῖς*, its diminutive *παιδίον* would be a young boy from seven to fourteen years of age, one whom Jesus saw (Matt 19:14; 18:3), as a type of the disciple. The key word in the Gospel of Matthew is *παιδίον* for a child and *μικρόν* for little ones. Both words hold the section (18:1-36) together.³³

There is another notion that the term *παιδίον* refers to children under the age of twelve; such children had no social status of political significance.³⁴ The focus is entirely on the child's age and status in relationship to others in the community. Thus the word *παιδίον* refers to a young boy or girl past infancy, but still too young to assume adult responsibilities, which comes after the age of twelve³⁵. In view of this, the symbolic term for child is not *τέκνον* but *παιδίον*, referring to the child's age not to its relation to parents. *Τέκνον*, which refers to a child in relation

³² Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (MaryKnoll: Ordus Books, 1999), p. 254.

³³ Xavier Leon Dufour, *Dictionary of the New Testament* (London: Chapman, 1980), p. 132.

³⁴ Daniel J. Harrington ed., "The Gospel of Matthew" *Sacra Pagina* (Minnesota: Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 264

³⁵ LaVerdiere, p. 82.

to his/her parents, evokes the correlative term "parents."³⁶ Matthew has used the word *παιδίον* symbolically or metaphorically in many instances depicting community members who belong to the kingdom of heaven. It sounds strange to discover that the term **child/children** could also be used as a serious insult as reflected in Matt 11:16-17. It is held that to call an adult a child is an insult.³⁷ But it depends so much on the context in which it is used. It appeared an insult in the sense that children lack wisdom and their untrained behaviour is often inappropriate. Actually, the word *παιδίον* stands out as the symbol for a true follower of Christ unlike others such as *νήπιος*, *τέκνον* and so forth. Do you know that the term for the infant Jesus in the infancy narrative uses the word *παιδίον* and not *βρέφος* that means infant? In fact, half of the texts in which the term 'child' (*παιδίον*) occurs, relate to Jesus himself.

1.5. Conclusion

We have seen that both in Jewish and Christian societies God operates in a way that seems to be contrary to human perception. A child, one who lives at the beck and call of others with no status and identity, wins favor in the eyes of God and becomes the bearer and sign of God's presence among the people. In the eyes of God, a child or little one is no longer a property of parents or adults but receives a new status and identity that brings a new way of looking at the reality of human relationships. What has been discussed in this chapter sets the stage for understanding the power of Jesus' words about being a child, and his use of children to describe and illustrate what it demands to belong to the heavenly kingdom. No, matter how insignificant a person can be, he/she can be favored by God and communicate his wonders.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 82.

³⁷ Malina, p. 93

Chapter II

Exegesis on Texts that Contain 'Children'

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter we shall tackle the significance of the symbol of a **child**. The exegetical work will allow us to see what lies behind the “children” and the “little ones” in the Matthean Context. Above all, we shall also see the theology involved in the symbol of children and its relevance in Matthew’s theology about the kingdom of heaven. When exploring the texts we shall discover that Matthew uses the terms the “child” and “little ones” synonymously. But the “little one” (μικρόν) has a wider meaning. All in all both represent the community members, some of whom were exposed or vulnerable to teachings and perspectives that take them away from the group.³⁸ The child in the community of Matthew is a controversial symbol aimed at bringing a new understanding of greatness. In this chapter we shall see that disciples are called to look at a child and model their lives on it. What a shock for the Jewish mind! How can the disciple imitate the child, who has no status in the society?

2.2 Context and Location of the Topic

Generally, we can say that our topic starts right from the nativity narrative as our interest is in the word παιδίον as a symbolic term. The word παιδίον is first applied to Jesus at the time of his birth. It has been noticed by some scholars that the role of the “child” or “little one” stretches from very near the start of Matthew’s first discourse of Jesus 5:19, to the end of the last

³⁸ J. Andrew Overman, *Church and Community in Crisis: The Gospel according to Matthew* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), p. 263.

25:40,45, and especially articulated at the climax of three of these discourses in chapters 10,18,25.³⁹

What good can come from a divided, small group that lives in tension from time to time? Matthew's audience was probably small in number, a minority community within the large dominant society.⁴⁰ The audience of Matthew was part of the diversity of the Jewish community in Antioch. The Matthean community experienced a lot of tensions, the main one being a result of the existence of the Jesus' group and some others within the synagogue community. Most certainly, the tension was between Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles. A situation of rising tension and antagonism, of accusation and allegation, means the growing refusal by both groups to recognize the legitimacy of the other.⁴¹ In this situation, humility manifested in a child would serve as a solution. People wish to compare the Matthean community to that of Paul at Corinth: that is, both argued about the interpretation of the Law as well as about the right ordering of relationships and resources.⁴² The tension was also due to the fact that the situation was such that greed and power were at play as house members vied with each other about being the greatest (18:1-4).⁴³ Naturally this is the result when two groups or parties are at loggerheads. Each party sees itself on the right side. Experience has taught human beings that the one who seems to be right considers himself/herself superior to the other, bringing the mentality of hierarchy. Matthew had in mind that power is dangerous, though necessary. Therefore the authoritative leaders (23:24) need humility. We should have in mind that in spite of having authoritative leaders, there was no hierarchy in Matthew's community.

³⁹ David L. Balch ed., *Social History of the Matthean Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), p. 105

⁴⁰ Carter, p. 27.

⁴¹ Ibid, p.27.

⁴² Crosby, p. 167.

⁴³ Raymond Brown and others ed., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary Student Edition* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1997), p. 632

Certainly, a true witness of Christ, by dependence on his/her master and not self-seeking by clinging to power, must have been needed within membership of the Matthean community which was being smothered by the worldly standard of the notion of greatness. What we should keep in mind is that the Church of Matthew within which tradition and memory of Jesus are preserved, was becoming more and more structured. Matthew recognizes the danger that any structure set up in this world tends to take its values from the other structures that surround it. Matthew tried to show that in Jesus' set of values, the humble are more important for the powerful dependence on God's rule; and so the little child is held up as an example.⁴⁴

What was going on in the community of Matthew for the evangelist to bring the idea of the image of a child regardless of the tension? Chapter 18 of the gospel gives us the context in which the child becomes the symbol of Christian living. This chapter contains the fourth discourse that deals with the moral life, the ecclesiastical disciple and hierarchy. In Matthew's community hierarchical figures are notably lacking but it shows some tendencies coming from the outside that are trying to distort the goal of the community. In Pharisaism and rabbinism, the Jews form a firm front against the evangelist and his Church. Titles of honour and dignity are important to the Jews; ranks and standing are ambitiously debated.⁴⁵ The discourse in which a child is exalted deals with relations within the Church, the condition necessary for healthy interaction among disciples to overcome divisions and generate reconciliation within the community. Indeed, the first paragraph of chapter 18 contains an important question that gives us the context of why a child became a symbol for Matthew, though the background of the context can be seen from 17:25 in which the word 'house' is set the context; the context indicates division in Matthew's households⁴⁶. This appears evident in the main body of this section, 18:1-

⁴⁴ Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Double Day Publication Group, inc, 1997), p. 184.

⁴⁵ Wolfgang Trilling, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew Vol. 2* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1971), p. 324.

⁴⁶ Crosby, p. 53.

35. Thus, the symbol of a child for Christian living is based on the question, **Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? (18:1).**

2.3 Detailed Analysis of Relevant Texts

The first story of children we encounter in Matthew's Gospel is that of the child Jesus (Matt 2:8). Jesus entered into human history not as an adult but as a child. When he grew up, Jesus spoke to adults both about children and how to become childlike. It is very striking to realize that the first child encountered by the reader of Matthew's good news is Jesus himself. In fact, in chapter two of Matthew in the infancy narrative, Jesus is constantly referred to as **the child** (παιδίον): nine times in all.⁴⁷

2.3.1. Child Jesus

1:18 ... **When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child (γαστήρι) of the Holy Spirit ... 1:23 "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means God with us).**"

The phrase, 'she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit,' does not stand as a symbol of the child. This is because the word **child**⁴⁸ has not yet been used, but implied as an idiom, meaning that Mary was pregnant by the action of the Holy Spirit. Thus the emphasis is not on the child but God's work through the power of the Holy Spirit. The meaning of the Holy Spirit suggest to us that Mary's Child is not due to human action but divine. Therefore we can say that this child is not like any other child for he is born of Mary and the Holy Spirit. Hence, this makes him special. The Holy Spirit is God's presence among his people: no wonder the child is called Emmanuel. What is so significant by calling the child Jesus, this name? The child Jesus is called

⁴⁷ Weren, p. 54

⁴⁸ Παιδίον (child) has not yet entered the text, but is hinted at in the language of preceding verses.

Emmanuel to fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah 7:14,16. The Child Jesus will be the hope of the Gentile world, as illustrated by the magis' journey guided by God through a star and by dreams.⁴⁹ God, in the person of an infant, Jesus, has decided to be among his people, but not according to human expectation. God appears to turn the tables upside down. In patriarchal society, God's presence is manifested in the male elders, Rabbis and Scribes the possessors of God's law and teachers of the Torah respectively. But why didn't God become Emmanuel in the elders, men and women? Is it because God chooses what is foolish in the world to shame the wise? Or what is weak to shame the strong? (1Cor 1:27).

2:2,7-9. "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? ... When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him ..., he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "go and search diligently for the Child (τοῦ παιδίου).

The word **child** in the above pericope is the main subject. Here, Jesus is referred to not by name or a title but as **the child**. It evokes the hearer's knowledge of commonly known attitudes to children in the Greco-Roman world. It is not out of good will that Herod sent wise men to go and search for the child but out of fear of the newborn king. God's presence in the child has become a threat to those in power and the closed-minded. The insignificant child stands as a threat to those who are comfortable according to worldly standards. Herod is portrayed to be troubled, together with all Jerusalem, by the presence of the child Jesus. The good news is that God's presence makes the comfortable people, uncomfortable and the uncomfortable people, comfortable. Herod's anxiety about a child affirms the view that though children were not denied parental love in patriarchal households, they were often viewed with suspicion, as a threat to

⁴⁹ Freedman, p. 906.

adult (male) civil order.⁵⁰ Filled with suspicion about the child, King Herod desired to eliminate God's presence by killing a defenceless child. The frequent and repeated references to Jesus as a child, weak and vulnerable, contrasted with the murderous power of King Herod, evoke such experiences of marginality and vulnerability.⁵¹ We cannot imagine how the life of a passive child is endangered by an adult. He has just been born, and not even being at the age of reason his life is at stake.

The scene at the birth of Jesus is totally dominated by other figures: by the Magi, by Herod and by Joseph. Besides this, it is evident from the pericope that the child, though weak and vulnerable in male presence, is the leader who comes from Bethlehem, the shepherd of Israel, modelled on David. Later in Matthew it will become clear that leaders of the community must model themselves on children.⁵² Here, someone who is still a child is regarded as a leader. In verse 2, the Magi call the child "the king of the Jews". And later in verse 4, Herod himself called the child Jesus the "Messiah" probably without knowing that he is searching for the Messiah. I have observed an irony here. Herod, who is the enemy of Jesus, is affirming something positive about Christ. Truly, Jesus is the Messiah who has come to save the whole world, including his aggressor.

2:10. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house (τὴν οἰκίαν εἶδον τὸ παδίον μετὰ Μαρίας) the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.

Contrary to Herod's behaviour upon learning the birth of the child, the wise men were not troubled, but rejoiced. Due to their open mindedness to the reception of God's message, they recognize God in the figure of a child and worshiped him. Matthew has told us that the child was

⁵⁰ Carter, p. 80.

⁵¹ Ibid, p.80.

⁵² Weren, p. 54.

in the house. The parallel in Luke does not indicate that Jesus was born in the house. Instead of using the word house (οἰκίαν), Luke has used the inn (καταλύματα). The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus was born in the manger (ἐν φάτνῃ) in the inn (καταλύματα) (Luke 2:7,12). Who is correct of the two evangelists? We know that both Matthew and Luke, in writing the Gospels had access to the logia 'Q' and used their material freely in order to suit their audience. When writing the Gospel Matthew has in mind the restoration of the house of Israel. So, what is important for Matthew is the aspect of household. In Matthew 15:24 Jesus declared openly that he had been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. For Matthew, the household was a basic unit of society, socially, religiously and economically; this is an important location. Numerous important things will happen in the houses (8:14; 9:10,23; 17:25;26:6). In various ways the gospel will challenge the normative patriarchal and hierarchical household pattern and offer the disciple a vision of restructured relationships and more equitable use of resources.⁵³

Actually, Matthew sees his community as the 'house' of God or family of the heavenly Father (Matt 23:9). He sees the Christians as family members who ought to live in harmony as people belonging to the same house, as we shall see later. The house with the presence of the child Jesus will be the source of reconciliation and unity of God's people. Crosby has the view that Matthew is offering his own collegial type of *haustafel*⁵⁴ as a way of dealing with problems in his divided house Church.⁵⁵ Sooner or later we shall see, in the fourth discourse, the need for all in the household to become like children (18:1-10). Thus, by placing the birth of Jesus in the house, Matthew paves the way to the understanding of an important discourse that enlightens the followers of Christ on how to live as brothers and sisters of the same family, in faith.

⁵³ Carter, p. 81.

⁵⁴ *Hhaustafel* is a German word for household.

⁵⁵ Crosby, p. 70.

2:14-16. And he rose and took the child (τὸ παιδίον) and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, ... Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children (ἀνεῖλεν πάντας τοὺς παῖδας) in Bethlehem and in all region who were two years old or under.

The child Jesus, together with his mother, are rushed to Egypt by Joseph. What does Egypt signify? Something in particular to the author? Matthew is the only evangelist who has reported this incident. He wants his audience to recall the liberation of the sons and daughters of Israel from slavery in Egypt under the reign of Pharaoh. Therefore by telling his story Matthew is making a recapitulation of what happened to Israel. Thus a good number of commentators seem to agree that the experiences of the child are remarkably similar to those of Moses, who was saved from death at the decree of Pharaoh by God's intervention through at least five women⁵⁶. Just as Moses liberated his people at the risk of his life, so the child Jesus identifies with people by suffering, exile, and danger.⁵⁷

Due to the lack of openness and receptivity like children, the kings, chief priests and scribes failed to perceive the will of God. We have seen in Matthew 2:14-16 that Jesus is not the only child in danger. The story speaks of other children who innocently received the death penalty. Without doubt, this episode corresponds to Pharaoh's slaughtering of the male babies of the Israelites at the time of Moses' birth, Moses, whom God chose to liberate the people of Israel from the bondage of Egyptians (Exod 1:15-22). In the mind of Matthew, Jesus stands out as the new Moses who has come to save his people from the yoke of sin. Jesus is not only a new Moses but he is the Messiah. The point here is that Herod's killing of innocent children in cold blood is an action which is really directed against his messianic rival.⁵⁸ Our story of the killing of children by the king, traces back to the massacre in Bethlehem with the sorry fate of Rachel's children,

⁵⁶ The five women: *Shiphrah and Pual (midwives), the mother and sister of Moses, and the daughter of Pharaoh* (Exod 1. 15; 2:2-9).

⁵⁷ Freedman, p. 906.

who are deported to Babylon, as we have already seen in chapter one (Jer 31:15). What could be the reason that the narrator shows the merciless killing of innocent children just at the birth of Jesus? The narrator evidently wants to indicate in this way that the violence of which the children of Bethlehem have become the victims, is not the work of God but finds its origin in human action.⁵⁹ This makes sense to think that nothing evil comes from God but mostly from the bad intentions of a human person. Herod is not the only adult interested in the elimination of the child Jesus. He had been helped by the group of men, chief priests and scribes. By introducing the chief priests and scribes at the beginning of the Gospel, Matthew prepares the reader to see that Jesus will be in constant conflict with these men. In fact, since the slaughter of the innocent children resulted from the cooperation of the chief priest and scribes with Herod, this episode previews calamities to befall the Jewish nation for their, and especially their leaders' rejection of Jesus (23:3-39; 27:20-25)⁶⁰. The chief priests and scribes will be so closed minded that they will have difficulty in accepting the Word of God as the children do: but tax collectors and prostitutes will do so.

2.3.2 Children as Recipients of Revelation

11:25. At that time Jesus declared, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes."

The verse 11:25 should be understood in the whole context of chapter 11. This is the second time Jesus has compared his hearers with children (in 11:16 and 11:25) though not with the same terminology. In 11:16 the children (παιδίοις) have been portrayed with a negative

⁵⁸ Weren, p. 55

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 55.

characteristic, that is, they quarrel with one another while playing at the market place, while in 11:25 Jesus speaks in positive terms of the smallest children (νηπίους). He starts by holding up the children, thanking his Father for his work among the children. This is the only instance in the New Testament where it appears in a prayer of thanksgiving or praise for revelation.⁶¹ Matthew presents Jesus personally, thanking his Father, starting with "I thank you" (Ἐξομολογοῦμαι σοι). The verb ἐξομολογέω occurs elsewhere in Matthew only at 3:16, and in the context of a confession of sin.⁶² This is the only text in the gospels, other than its parallel in Luke 10:21, where the verb occurs as a first person declaration of praise. We may wonder why Jesus thanked his Father for hiding **these things** from the wise and intelligent and made them known to the infant. What are these hidden things? Why has God hidden them from some and revealed them to others? Does this not portray a God of partiality? Or is the gospel ant-intellectual? Who are the wise and **understanding** contrasted with the infants?

Matthew depicts the mutual knowledge of the Father and the Son as the object of revelation to Jesus' followers, particularly into a revelation of divine lowliness (v.v. 28-30). As Matthew's audience comprises predominantly Christians Jews⁶³, we see the opening thanksgiving typifying the Jewish style as recorded in 2 Samuel 22:50; Dan 2:19-23; and Sirach 51:1. Thus, we can infer that Jesus' giving praise to his Father is neither for the lack of openness of the 'wise' nor for the revelation to infants. Jesus' address to God as Father goes back to the Aramaic "*ADONAI*", for God as "Lord of heaven and earth" (Tob 7:18; Jdt 9:12).⁶⁴

⁶¹ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: Commentary on His Hand Book for a Mixed Church Under Persecution 2d ed.* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publication company, 1994), p. 35

⁶² Celia Deutsch, "Hidden Wisdom and the Yoke" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament No. 18* (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), p. 26.

⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 25.

⁶⁴ Matthew's church comprises Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles [Cf. Donald Senior, "Between Two Worlds: Gentiles and Jewish Christians" *CBO*, 61(1999) 6].

⁶⁵ Gundry, p. 216.

As already pointed out, it is strange to see Jesus praising God for hiding things from some people as though salvation is only reserved for a particular group. If we have recourse to the Hebrew Scriptures, the aspect of hiding things will not shock us. The Prophet Isaiah said, "Therefore, behold, I will again do marvellous things with this people, wonderful and marvelous; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hid" (Isaiah 29:14). According to Gundry, the hiding is the dark side of grace, a foil to God's revelation to the infants.⁶⁵ If we enter into the Gospel of Luke we shall perceive that the hidden things refer to the falling of Satan from heaven, to the revelation of authority given to Jesus' disciples and above all, to the recording of their names in heaven (Luke 10:17-20). Matthew's shifting of the context makes the hidden things refer to the works of the Christ. Therefore, in the Matthean context (chapter 11), the 'hidden things' refers to the significance of Jesus' deeds (11:2; 19) as expressing his God-given commission to manifest God's empire and saving presence (1:1, 17, 21-23; 4:17; 11:2). God has hidden Jesus' identity and role, which means the wise and intelligent do not encounter God's purpose.⁶⁶

Matthew seems to be playing with two words: **hidden** and **revealed**, or he is making a polemic between the wise and the infants, basing it on the aspect of hidden and revealed. That is, to the infants something is revealed and to the wise something is hidden. The context of "reveal" in v.25 is indicated by the pronoun **them**. The words 'reveal' and 'hidden' appear in the same verse. Its parallel can be found in the phrase, **no one knows**. What is hidden and revealed are the actions of the Father and of the Son. Therefore, that which is hidden and revealed by the Father is the Son himself and what pertains to him. The word ἀποκαλύπτω is also used with reference to Jesus later in Matthew's Gospel in conjunction with Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 29

⁶⁶ Carter, p. 257.

(16:13-20). In response to Peter's answer, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God", Jesus responds: "Blessed are you Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed (ἀπεκκάλυψέν) this to you but my Father who is in heaven" (16:17). In this regard the content of revelation is the identity of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. It is the revelation that comes directly from the Father to the infants, as it did to Peter. So, the content of hiding and revealing in the Matthean context is Jesus' words, the gospel of the kingdom.⁶⁷ Various traditions on this issue affirm God's revelation of Torah, wisdom, historical, and eschatological purposes.⁶⁸ The hiding and revealing of **these things** looks back to the works and mighty deeds of Jesus in chapter 11. If we proceed to chapter 13, we shall see that the secret of the kingdom is revealed to the disciples who, in this circumstance, are the infants. For instance, in 13:10-17, the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks in parables. He responds in v.11, "To you it has been given to know the secret of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." Probably the phrase, **is given** (δίδοται), should be understood as a theological passive, and so taken as a circumlocution for God's action of making known the secrets of the kingdom to some (i.e., the disciples) and not to others.⁶⁹

The pericope talks about **the wise and intelligent**. This phrase is not found anywhere in the Gospel of Matthew apart from here. Matthew 11:2-24 indicates that the polemic is directed against those in Israel who do not perceive the significance of Jesus and his ministry. When we read chapter 13, we see this reality reflecting indirectly, though to whom the secrets of the kingdom are not given are identified as the "crowds" 13:2 or simply "those" 13:11. Nevertheless, chapter 12 proposes more clearly that the wise and understanding are the scribes and Pharisees for they are officially the 'wise' and instructed, the Jewish establishment. In fact, in Matthew's Gospel they are the usual opponents of Jesus (especially in chapter 23). The phrase **the wise and**

⁶⁷ Deutsch, p. 28.

⁶⁸ Carter, p.257

⁶⁹ Deutsch, p. 29.

intelligent evokes a tradition critical of those leaders and elite, who refuse to recognize God's ways and purposes (Isaiah 29:9-24; Dan 2:1-13). They are not humble before God and do not fear God (Prov 3:5-7; Sir 1:16,27). They are unreceptive to God's revelation, protective of their own interests and control.⁷⁰ In Matthew's Gospel the political leaders (King Herod) and the religious elite (3:7-10; 9:34) have failed to recognize Jesus as God's agent.

On the other hand, the behaviour of the infants counteracts the mentality of **wise** and **intelligent**. In this regard, God bypasses the wise in Israel in favour of the simple. Unlike the wise, the infants are those teachable people who are not well versed in the law and rabbinic traditions.⁷¹ The Father is the one who provides and educates the infant by divine revelation through his Son. So the followers of Jesus are called *νήπιοι* for they are receptive to the word of Jesus, the Son of God. Due to this fact, *νήπιος* does not itself presuppose ignorance or lack of instruction. Rather, it seems to be used in the Gospel simply for disciples. The word *νήπιος* has been used in 21:16, as a citation of Psalm 8:2. Here it refers to the **children** (*παῖδας*) saluting Jesus as 'Son of David' and illustrated the opposition between the official religious leaders (*ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς*) and those who recognized Jesus as Messiah. This just confirms the view that *νήπιοι* in 11:25, is a designation for the disciples. It is not primarily a reference to learning or lack thereof. The 'infants' here are simply those who receive Jesus in faith.⁷² The wise of Israel failed to perceive the mysteries of God, and as a result God makes himself known to infants, that is, those who, in response to Jesus, turn and become like children (18:3). Barclay comments: Here Jesus is speaking out of experience, the experience that rabbis and wise men rejected him. The intellectual had no use for him; but the humble welcomed him. What did Jesus mean? He is very far from condemning intellectual power; what he is condemning is intellectual

⁷⁰ Carter, p. 257

⁷¹ Gundry, p. 216

⁷² Deutsch, p. 32

pride. It is not stupidity which admits, it is humility⁷³. This is more or less the same **child** seen in 18:3. Based on the above illustrations, we can infer that the wisdom of God belongs to children rather than to adults, wise in religion and the way of society and culture. Revelation is given to those who do not count, the ones ignored in the society, the ones who are useful as servants and slaves.

2.3.3 “Unless you become you like a Child”

Once again in Matthew we are introduced to the concept of childhood and its significance in Jesus' kingdom even more vividly postulated. The lowest person in the society, a child, has been erected in Matthew's community as the paradigm of the Reign of God.

18:4. At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And calling a child (παιδίον), he put him in the midst of them, and said, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child (παιδίον), he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

The hearers of the Matthean Jesus must have been shocked to see that the greatest in the kingdom is the lowest of the lowly. The words of Jesus turn upside down the existing social structure and authority, influence and wisdom. From the above verse, we easily see that there is a close relationship between the symbol of a child and the kingdom of heaven. The question, **Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?** is taken from the Gospel of Mark. In Mark, the question is the result of the dispute of disciples about greatness (Mark 9:33-37). As usual, Matthew treats his sources rather freely. He has shortened the narrative introduction. Matthew puts a direct question, the phrase: “Who is the greatest?” **Who?** and **greatest** come from Mark.

⁷³ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew Vol. 2* (Bangalore: Theological Publication, 1987), p. 4

Matthew adds *is* for clarity. 'The kingdom of heaven' typifies his diction (25:7)⁷⁴. In editing Mark 9:33-37, Matthew has improved the disciples' image by having them question Jesus directly, rather than having him intervene in their quarrel. In accordance with Mark, the followers of Jesus have disputed with one another about who the greatest was. Jesus asks why they have disputed. On the contrary, they keep silent. Unlike Mark, the Matthean Jesus does not ask a question, and they do not keep quiet. Instead, they take the first step themselves and pose an innocent question to their master. In view of this, Harrington holds that the issue is no longer greatness among Jesus' disciples but rather **greatness in the kingdom of heaven** and Jesus' symbolic action with the child is given an explicit interpretation in 18:3-4.⁷⁵ By adding 'the kingdom of heaven' to his sources, Matthew transforms their query into a more spiritual concern than pre-eminence among the disciples. Matthew does not portray the shameful state of the followers of Christ, as it is in Mark 9:33-37, nor show the question of greatness to be the result of the disciples being jealous of Peter.⁷⁶ Instead, he spares the disciples the indignation of Jesus (contrast Mark 10:22-24); he omits the colourful affective details of Jesus' embrace.⁷⁷ Barclay has the view that Peter might be the one who asked the question and that it was Peter's little boy whom Jesus took and stood in the midst, because we know that Peter was married (Matt 8:14; 1 Cor 9:5)⁷⁸.

Our question, **Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?** seems to be simple, but most commentators find it difficult to place in a particular time: whether it refers to the future or present time. What is the source of this question? Carter has formulated the following presupposition:

⁷⁴ Gundry, p. 359

⁷⁵ Harrington, p. 66.

⁷⁶ John P. Meier, *Matthew: New Testament Message Vol. 3* (Ireland: Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1984), p. 201.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 201

⁷⁸ Barclay, p. 175.

- i. Perhaps it is spurred by the role that Jesus gives to Peter and by his uneven behaviour in 16:16-19,22-23; 17:4,24.
- ii. Perhaps Jesus' evoking of the 'king of the earth' tradition (17:25) in which their pretensions to greatness are relativized in relation to God's purposes provoke it. What then is the greatest and who has it?
- iii. Perhaps it derives from Jesus' word about the way of the cross in 16:24. The cross is a way of shame and exclusion in the imperial world. What does greatness look like on that?
- iv. Perhaps it derives from their cultural context, in which greatness comprises status accumulated from wealth, education, birth, patronage, office, and power exercised over others for one's own benefit and status (20:25). Is Jesus' new community (16:18) the same or different? Jesus has anticipated the issue in indicating that doing and teaching his instruction means being great in God's reign (5:19).⁷⁹

In addition to that there is another opinion, that the disciples have understood Jesus' foregoing words about their being sons of a king (17:24-25) and now want to know the implication of that for the question of rank in the kingdom. After all, a monarchy presupposes hierarchy rather than equality.⁸⁰ The above presuppositions shed light on what might be going on in the minds of the disciples. Scholars put questions such as, "Does the expression of 'kingdom of heaven' mean the form to be taken by the kingship of God at the end of time, or its present realization? Hence, does the question mean: "Who will be the greatest one day when the kingdom of God is fully manifested, or who is now the greatest among the disciples?"⁸¹ Most probably the question was, 'who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' The very fact that the disciples asked that question implies that they had no idea at all what the kingdom of heaven was. Jesus' taking of a child is an acted-out parable which indicates that unless **you turn** and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. By saying **unless you turn**, it presupposes that Jesus was giving a warning to the disciples that they were going in a completely

⁷⁹ Carter, p. 362.

⁸¹ Gundry, p. 362.

wrong direction, away from the kingdom of heaven and not towards it.⁸² Above all, in a parabolic action, Jesus pronounces a statement of a 'condition for entrance.' He states that only those who truly repent and be converted, only those who admit their littleness and put all their trust in God their Father, can enter the kingdom.⁸³ From this point of view we can infer that the phrase: **unless you turn and become like children** has a deep spiritual meaning. The disciples of Jesus needed to turn, for in life it is all a question of what a person is aiming at; if he/she is aiming at fulfilment of personal ambition, the acquisition of personal power and exaltation of self, he/she is aiming at precisely the opposite of the kingdom of heaven. For this reason, the followers of Christ need to turn and get back onto the right track.

What we have to bear in mind is that the verb **turn** does not mean to 'return' to the state of childhood, but change direction and conduct, alter the way of conceiving greatness.⁸⁴ Only by doing so does a person 'become a little child'. Therefore, to be like children is a spiritual decision to be followed by a transformation of attitude. The act of conversion is to be made explicit in thought and will. He/she who does so is truly small, lowly, and hence humble.⁸⁵ Thus, one becomes like a child by turning away from what he/she is, by humbling oneself. This demands self-denial, that is, giving up what one is, is a prerequisite for participation and being 'great' in the kingdom.⁸⁶ Indeed the disciples must change their dispositions and habits. The corresponding Hebrew *shazib* verb is used in Hebrew scripture to denote thoroughgoing repentance.⁸⁷ It is a situation whereby a person learns, like little children, to say 'Abba' again.

⁸¹ Trilling, p. 320.

⁸² Barclay, p. 175.

⁸³ Meier, p. 205.

⁸⁴ David Hill, *The New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew* (London: Grand Rapids; Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), p. 273.

⁸⁵ Trilling, p.322.

⁸⁶ Daniel Patte, *A Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Pennsylvania: Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1987), p. 248.

⁸⁷ George Buttrick Arthur and others ed., *The Interpreter's Bible: New Testament Articles Mark and Matthew Vo. 7* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), p.46.

In life we have observed children's openness to others: readiness to receive is quite natural for them. When it comes to adults the situation is opposite. For the adults this virtue has to be learned. How? Matthew challenges them to repent, undergo a *metanoia*, a radical change in their thinking and behaviour. In this way, they become receptive (cf. 11:25) and trust in God. Hence, it brings about the realization of God's kingdom.

We may ask why Jesus gave his answer by bringing a child in the midst of the disciples. The phrase, **in the midst** or **among them** appears in 14:6 when Herodias' daughter danced at Herod's party. The author shows that Jesus' community contrasts to that of the political elite⁸⁸ Being a rabbi, Jesus acted exactly like any other Jewish rabbi. Rabbinical literature often uses children as an example of purity⁸⁹. Jesus also may have had in mind a child's innocence. While Jesus values marginalized, innocent children, the child becomes a metaphor of discipleship. Nevertheless, various suggestions have been made concerning what was originally meant by **become like children**. Hare has refuted the notion of children's innocence. He argues that a child was not an infant (βρέφος) but a παιδίον, therefore children beyond infancy can hardly be described as innocent.⁹⁰

The child talked about in chapter 18 serves as a symbol for humility, not because children are naturally humble, but because they are dependent. To humble oneself is to set a self-imposed limit; self-regulation checks the tendency to arrogance built into positions of authority.⁹¹ On this basis we can say that Matthew is presenting a child as a model of humility for his community. By Jesus' calling of a little child, the evangelist tends to employ kingship categories metaphorically and uses terms of endearment to describe community members as 'child', 'brothers' and 'little

⁸⁸ Carter, p. 362

⁸⁹ Buttrick, p. 468.

⁹⁰ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew: Interpretation; Bible Commentary for Teachers and Preaching* (USA: John Knox Press, 1993), p. 209.

⁹¹ Brown, *New Jerome Commentary Student Edition*, p. 661.

ones', all of which serve as common titles for fellow members. The child is being used metaphorically to capture the traits of dependence and openness that traditionally and romantically have been assigned to children and encouraged within the community.⁹² He/she who takes the image of a child must not claim priority, position, or acumen. These do not constitute true greatness. In chapter 23, Matthew explicitly rejects titles for the community and advocates the abandonment of hierarchy (23:8-10). Actually, by using the image of becoming little children, Jesus is not recommending childishness, but a child-like trust in a loving Father, a trust which awaits everything and grabs at nothing.⁹³

2.3.4 'The Little Ones' who believe in Jesus

18:5-6. Whoever receives one such child (παιδίον) in my name receives me; but whoever causes one of these little ones (μικρῶν) who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

This passage shows a transition from using a **child** to **little one**. Verse 5 speaks of a positive reaction of people around the children, while verse 6 is about negative actions of which they are the target. Both verses speak of a special group in the community and they fix attention on the way in which this group is treated by other members of the community.⁹⁴ The shift from *παιδίον* to *μικρῶν* has directed the thought of the hearers to how the 'little ones' are to be treated, not on the requirement to **be like them**. As *παιδίον* is a key word in vv 1-5, also *μικρῶν* is a key word in vv 6-10. Verses 18:1-5, concerns literal children while the next paragraphs 18:8-9, and 10-14, have to do with believers. **Little ones** may include children also but *μικρῶν* in this context of Matthew clearly means one who has faith in Christ in the strict sense: "those who believe in

⁹² Overman, p. 264.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 264

⁹⁴ Weren, p. 59.

mc.”⁹⁵ They are members of the community, part of the circle of the disciples who have faith in common with, but distinguished from others by being little ones. The term **little ones** does not only signify the disciples but all who believe in Jesus. Regarding this issue Patte suggests that,

At first, one could be tempted to identify these little ones as disciples since they believe in Jesus. Yet this would be forgetting that those who believe in Jesus and his power are not mere the (ideal) disciples (cf. 17:20) but also the people in need of his help—the sick, the relatives or friends of the sick people (cf. chap 8-9). For Matthew, believing in Jesus and his power, and thus saying “Lord, Lord” (7:21-23), is a necessary part of discipleship, but it is not sufficient.⁹⁶

In this regard we can infer that for Matthew, the **little ones who believe** are precisely those who depend on God, who are child-like and see themselves as being in need of support and help. Are they the ones who have ‘little faith’, a notion which is found frequently only in Matthew’s Gospel, or are they members of less talents and attainments, who are overshadowed by their greater brothers and sisters? One can say that the ‘little ones’ refers to a beginner in faith, one who began in the right way and who may easily be deflected from it by the scandal (σκάνδαλον) of others.⁹⁷ Scandal is that which causes one to sin: stumbling block, offence, trouble (v.7).⁹⁸ Since the little ones can be led astray, Matthew emphasizes the importance of caring for the children for the sake of Christ. These are the people Jesus calls ‘the least of my brothers’ in the judgment discourse, 25:31-46. This is also true about those who are sent on mission by the Lord. That is, **the little ones** serve as a description of the disciples who have been sent out by Jesus:

⁹⁵ Trilling, p. 325.

⁹⁶ Patte, p. 249.

⁹⁷ Barclay, p. 4.

⁹⁸ Francis Wright Beare (tran), *The Gospel according to Matthew* (London: Harper and Row: Publishers, 1981), p. 376

they are dependent on the hospitality of others, since they may not make any material provision for their travel.⁹⁹

What does it mean when Jesus said, **In my name**? It implies accepting the little people in the Church as Christ's own; Jesus' **name** (10:22) because they embody his mission in their lifestyle. Their way of life challenges the current social structure and its legitimating worldview. But some will welcome them.¹⁰⁰

2.3.5 "Let the Children come to me"

19:13-15. Then children (παῖδες) were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciple rebuked the people, but Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven. And he laid his hands on them and went a way.

Jesus demands that the children should be taken to him so that he may pray over them. The pericope reflects the text we saw in Chapter one, in which Jacob pronounces his blessings on the two sons of Joseph (Gen 48). Probably, this is the background on which we can read our pericope. If we put the two texts side by side, we can see various elements in common: a) the children are brought to Joseph (Gen 48:10,13), and were brought to Jesus (Matt 19:13); and there is mention of laying on of hands (Gen 48:10; Matt 19:15). Similar to Jacob, by blessing the children, Jesus invokes on them all the good things that flow from participation in Jesus' passion and resurrection.¹⁰¹ It seems that bringing children to rabbis and prominent teachers for blessings was a common tendency among the Jews. Matthew reminds us that by blessing the children, Jesus is blessing the disciple who is poor and encumbered by the things of this age.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Weren, p. 59.

¹⁰⁰ Carter, p. 361.

¹⁰¹ LaVerdiere, p. 88.

¹⁰² J. C. Fenton, *The Pelican New Testament Commentary* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 1987), p. 312.

To show the dependence of the children, there is a stress on the passive verb 'were brought'. Matthew redacted Mark 10:13-14, and changed the words of Mark 10:13: And "they were bringing children" (καὶ προσέφερον αὐτῷ παιδία) to him changes to "the children were brought" (τότε προσηνέχθησαν αὐτῷ παιδία). Due to this change, the children are no longer direct objects but subjects.¹⁰³ So, by using the passive verb, it indicates that the author is not interested in those who brought them (adults). He leaves the bringers of the children unmentioned for the kingdom of heaven is for the people who rely on God and others. Moreover, in the gospel, the verb "were brought" has been frequently used for bringing the sick people to Jesus for healing (4:24; 8:16; 9:2,33; 12:22; 14:35; 17:16). It also describes bringing a gift to God or Jesus (2:11; 5:53; 8:4). Based on this fact, Carter suggests that the verb denotes reverent approach as people seek God's or Jesus' blessing and life giving power. Contrast the very different hostile opening involving the religious elite in the previous scene, 19:3.¹⁰⁴ The coming of the children to Jesus is symbolic of entering the kingdom of God, and His blessing, along with the imposition of hands, was symbolic of eternal life in the kingdom¹⁰⁵.

We are told that Jesus **rebuked** the disciples. In our gospel, the verb 'rebuke' is used in two ways. Whenever Jesus **rebukes**, God's will is accomplished (the storm 8:26); the newly healed (12:6); and the demon (17:18). The other side of the coin is that when it is the disciple or people who **rebuke**, things turns upside down. God's will is resisted: Peter (16:22), and the crowd (20:31). The rebuke by the disciple shows how the disciples represent a traditional viewpoint, according to which, children have a low status in society and are by no means permitted to participate fully in organized religion. Jesus insists that the children are just as

¹⁰³ Gundry, p. 383.

¹⁰⁴ Carter, p. 385. (And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?").

¹⁰⁵ LaVerdicre, p. 88.

valuable to God as adults. The action of Jesus signifies that the child is the paradigm for what it means to be helplessly dependent on the Father in heaven.¹⁰⁶

There are different views as to why the disciples rebuked the people who brought the children to Jesus. The first one is that the rebuke by the disciples is not based on jealousy or impatience, but on lack of understanding of Jesus' ministry; they were annoyed that he was being stopped on his way to Jerusalem. Were they hastening him onwards to the city in hope that he would make a triumphant messianic display there?¹⁰⁷ The second opinion is that, "Those who brought the children to Jesus may have believed that the 'Rabbi' had some magic power which could benefit the children."¹⁰⁸ The first presupposition sounds better than the second one, on account of the disciples showing their lack of understanding of Jesus' mission.

The idea of bringing the children to Jesus was that **he might lay** his hands on them. Once again Matthew changes the words of Mark who used 'so that **he might touch** them'. Matthew does not present the scene of embracing children. As a redactor he deletes Mark's "hugging them" in order to cast the children as disciples old enough to understand, rather than as infants or toddlers too young to have the understanding necessary for discipleship.¹⁰⁹ It was a common practice among the Jews, laying on of hands as a gesture of blessing. And blessing is often associated with prayer. Later in the gospel (21:15) Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem is highlighted by a prayer, recognizing the presence of Jesus with 'the kingdom of David' "Hosanna to the son of David!" Who are these crying out to Jesus in the temple? They are children (disciples) who have learnt dependence on God. The word 'Hosanna' means "Help (or save), I pray."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Hare, p. 224.

¹⁰⁷ Hill, p. 282.

¹⁰⁸ Fenton, p. 312.

¹⁰⁹ Gundry, p. 384.

¹¹⁰ Brown, *The New Jerome Bible Commentary Student Edition*, p. 664.

2.4 Theological meaning for the Author

Matthean theology calls the followers to have faith at all costs, for God is close to all those who are receptive to the will of God manifested in the person of Jesus Christ. For Matthew, to be a Christian is not a self-seeking business but a total commitment to and dependency on God, like a child in all circumstances. This reality is seen very clearly in the Beatitudes (5:3-12), in which those who depend on God are assured that YHWH will take care of them. The God of Matthew is one who makes Godself known in the weak who constantly look at YHWH's favour. Therefore the little ones are not just the poor of the world but all who have faith in Jesus the Messiah who inaugurates the kingdom of God, by living according to God's will as he demanded for Israel.

Thus, Matthew's theology of the church is centered on total dependence on God and caring for one another as brothers and sisters, regardless of status. The Matthean Jesus had in mind Israel (10:6) or a household community of disciples that manifests the reign of God. How? By receiving and caring for the little ones. Thus, to become like a child has nothing to do with innocence or simplicity or sinlessness. Rather, the Matthean Jesus is calling for humility, the 'mother', nurse, foundation, and center of all other virtues.¹¹¹ The point of Matthew is that the followers of Jesus, reflecting upon this illustration, are to rid themselves of all pride, 'the root, the source, the mother of sin.' In accordance with Jeremias, Matthew's theology teaches that to be a child again means to learn to say 'ABBA' again.¹¹² Calling God 'ABBA' is a sign of trust and of being helplessly dependent to the uttermost on God, who is related to the 'child' as no human

¹¹¹ W. D. David, and others ed., *A Critical and Exegetic Commentary: The Gospel according to Saint Matthew Vol. 2* (Scotland: T & T Clark Ltd, 1991), p. 757.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 758.

parent can be. Thus, dependence is a humble acknowledgment that God is sovereign and his rule must be obeyed.¹¹³

The symbol of children calls those who are infected with the world's appetite for lording it over others, to completely surrender this lust in imitation of Jesus who is gentle and lowly of heart. Matthew's words: "Whoever causes one of the little ones who believes in me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and be drowned in the depth of the sea" (18:5-6). In his theology, Matthew uses apocalyptic warning to encourage members to examine their own lives and behaviour. People should long to become like children so that they are blessed rather than cursed at the eschatological judgment. It follows that, it is for the sake of receiving children that one should humble oneself, because as long as one does not become like children one cannot receive children; one will only scandalize them.¹¹⁴ Matthew's view in this regard was based on his deep and emotional concern for the members of the community. For him they were children, family members, **little ones** who had the forces and authority in Matthew's context set against them.¹¹⁵ To preserve the unity of the group was a paramount concern for Matthew. This is because when people of God are united they manifest the reign and the glory of God. This is due to the fact that the spirit of God unites and the spirit of the evil one separates. Based on this fact, Matthew's position was that it was not acceptable to lose even one of these **little ones**. The **little ones** for Matthew are liable, those who believe in Jesus and those who are fragile believers, to fall from faith. Hence, anyone who causes them to stumble due to his selfish, power-crazed will, necessarily faces a severe punishment.

¹¹³ Overman, p. 264.

¹¹⁴ Patte, p. 250.

2.5 Conclusion

Indeed, the children are a paradigm for building the kingdom of heaven in the Matthean community, centering on Christ. Jesus is the initiator of the kingdom of God, as he entered into human history as the child on the occasion of incarnation. As the child is called Emmanuel, God-with-us, the presence of a child signifies the reign of God to those who recognize him with the eyes of faith like the little ones. The whole of this Chapter two has brought out vividly the symbol of **children** carrying a very powerful message for the Matthean community and for us in our African context, in which more and more people are yearning for greatness, power, honour and domination. The child's humility, presented by the author, is the pattern of the Christian's behaviour to his/her fellow human beings. The child's dependence and trust are the pattern of the believer's attitude towards God, the Father of all. Furthermore, all our life as followers of Christ should aim at checking ourselves daily and must be measured by the standard of little children, in accordance with the mind of Matthew. Becoming like children implies abandonment of the standards and values of the natural world and submission to God's values, as Jesus did. This is a great challenge to Christian witness in Africa, as we shall see in the next chapter.

¹¹⁵ Hare, p. 209.

Chapter III

Pastoral Application

3.1 Introduction

What does it mean to be a Christian; lay, ordained or religious in Africa? It seems in many contemporary Christian communities, people are asking the question: “Who is the greatest among them?” I have perceived that our Church in Africa has some tendencies of fighting for positions in the Church, just (more or less) as in the Matthean Community. The community of Matthew was developing a tendency from the Pharisaic communities of clinging to power. Similarly, some of our Church leaders are also copying the power-hungry mentality of our political leaders and traditional rulers. To be more realistic, this trend is threatening our community living, for the Church appears as if it is for the clergy only. Where is the place for **the children**? By those, I mean all Christians, especially including women and children. We have already seen that Matthew shows concern for everyone, especially the weak ones. Thus, I believe the Church in Africa is called to give witness of its faith in Christ by caring for one another. There is a need for Christians in Africa to **turn** and become like little children. The theme of **children** in Matthew concerns all the followers of Christ. But I feel urged to allocate it in three areas. Hence, in this chapter we shall see how the gospel message of **children** challenges lay people in Small Christian Communities, and members of religious life and those in priestly life.

3.2 Priesthood a Call to Become Like Little Children

In one way or another, to become a priest is to be an elder in the Christian community as the word ‘priest’¹¹⁶ suggests. It is this ‘elder’ that the Matthean Jesus is commanding to become

¹¹⁶ The word ‘priest’ comes from the Greek word ‘presbyter’ which simply means an elder

like a child. How? A priest as we know, is ordained for service as children do. In most African communities, childhood has the valuable role of service¹¹⁷ in the community. Thus, priests are challenged to emulate children in the area of service. Nevertheless, today the situation is different: priests, as elders, receive too much respect such that they tend to forget to be at the service of the people. Instead of serving, they are the ones who are being served.

It is sad to see that priesthood in the Church is becoming like a position of honor and prestige rather than a position of service, particularly in Africa today. The message of Jesus is startling. How can a priest (an elder) take the place of a slave? The gospel challenges our priests to break through the cultural concepts of greatness and embrace the spirit of service, that of a slave regardless of one's status. What kind of service? It is a service that involves becoming a servant: it counts for nothing and despised by all.¹¹⁸ On the contrary, priestly life today is that of a white-collar job. Undoubtedly, priests in Africa are counted among the elite, holding position in offices. Consequently, some of the clergy are prone to measure their life style on the standard of the elite and the upper class of the society. As a result, a worrying number of our priests identify themselves with the learned and the rich, and not with the poor. Nowadays, being a priest is a question of, which car do I drive? Which parish or institute am I in charge of? What kind of women do I associate with? Which class of people do I serve? It is disheartening to see that many clergy do not wish to work in rural parishes and villages. I think it is a question of seeking honor and identity in the society, rather than embracing the values contained in the symbol of **children**.

The gospel also calls our priests to work in the name of Jesus and not in their own names that leads to self-glorification. The message is clear: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (Matt 18:5). It demands a life of prayer from a priest who is constantly

¹¹⁷ Children have sense of belonging to adults. They are told by elders what to do, when not to do something. They have respect for elders thus, they obey and serve them. For instance, to fetch water and firewood, and they do house chores.

immersed in the work of Christ. I strongly support Greshake who asserts: "The relationship to Jesus Christ frees one for a glad and serene community-service which is not self-seeking or self-celebrating, which trusts one's own ability and sufficiency."¹¹⁹

Matthew, in his presentation of **children and little ones**, urges his church members to live as brothers and sisters. In a similar way the Word of God calls priests/church leaders to give true witness by treating everybody with the greatest kindness, after the model of our Lord. The document of Vatican II Council emphasizes that although priests owe service to everybody, the poor and the weaker ones have been committed to their care in a special way.¹²⁰ A cause of grave concern is that some of the priests have no time for the little ones but have time to spend with the healthy, the rich and beautiful women and girls, causing scandal to **the little ones**.

Priests in principle are people who are supposed to be humble and open-minded. Their greatness is recognized by their humble service: "Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:4). Based on this fact, I concur with the statement, which says: "A great vocation involves a correspondingly greater burden and a greater humbling of one called."¹²¹ Because our priests are more informed in matters of religion than most of the lay people, some clergy find it difficult to humble themselves and listen to the poor people. They often give a deaf ear to the cries and opinion of the little ones (μικρῶν). Are they not just like the 'wise' and 'intelligent' mentioned in Matthew 11:25?¹²² With the little experience I have in five African countries, I support McGarry, a priest working in Kenya, who confessed that, "We priests do not like to be told that there are things we have to learn or that we

¹¹⁸ Gusbert Greshake, *The Meaning of Christian Priesthood* (Westminster: Maryland Publications, 1989), p. 144

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 145

¹²¹ Vatican II Council: *Decree on the Ministry of Life of Priests*, no.6

¹²² Greshake, p. 144.

¹²² "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babies."

are called to change our way of acting from what I might call the 'Father knows best and knows everything'."¹²³ Quinn highlights this point as he commented:

"Many church leaders want absolute control and give lay people little room to breathe. Some consider them as a threat to their work and their authority. Why do some priests have the *Big Bwana* mentality? Others are paternalistic. Some just like to control everything. This is completely non-biblical. Can we share the work of spreading the Good News in our parishes together? Christ taught his chosen ones humility and service. Should not the ministerial priesthood be at the service of the kingly priesthood? Can we not be servant-leader as Christ was?"¹²⁴

It is to this mentality that the gospel is asking us to turn and become like children. As followers of Christ with great responsibilities in the Church, priests need to turn and get back onto the right track worthy of their vocation. Failing to do that, they will remain unreceptive to God's revelation, protecting their own interests that might lead them to eternal damnation (Matt 18:6).

3.3 'Children' as Model for Religious Life

The concept of religious life embraces the symbolism of the **children** presented in this paper. We have already seen that the presence of a child among the disciples symbolizes humility and total dependence on God. A true religious, a witness of Christ, by relying on God and not self-seeking by clinging to power, honor and material possession is needed in our African context. We have seen and experienced that in many places human life is no longer considered valuable. Among many people today, there is a controlled hunger for riches and power, and people are often tempted to satisfy it by using any means, just or unjust. Indeed, many seem to

¹²³ Cecil McGarry, *The Implications of the African Synod: A Step Forward* (Nairobi: Publication Africa, 1994), p. 16.

¹²⁴ Richard J. Quinn, *Who are Stealing Our Sheep?* (Limuru: Kolbe Press, 1997), p. 19.

accept the wrong principle that, "the end justifies the means". Material possession, honor and power seem to be the number one aim these days. Therefore, people are measured by what they have and not by who they are, that is, human beings made in the likeness and image of God (Gen 1.27). In this situation, the three vows of religious life should stand out as the sign of God's presence among the people as they go opposite to the standard of the world.

Matthew, in the image of the **little ones**, brings out the idea of caring for and receiving each other as brothers and sisters. The **little ones** are those who believe in Jesus Christ. Religious are people who publicly pronounce their faith in following Jesus by taking religious vows. Hence, like Matthew's community, Christians need to give witness by their simplicity and openness to God. Lumen Gentium declares openly that one of the manifestations of this call to holiness in religious life is witness of fraternal life in community.¹²⁵ Often, we see many religious communities having tensions like the Matthean Community, because greed and power are at play, as community members are fighting for greatness in the way the world understands greatness. Many are yearning for certain higher studies or professional training which are not even compatible with their charism.

I see the symbol of **children** as coinciding with the state of religious life. To be a religious, in principle, is to surrender oneself totally to God through the profession of the evangelical counsels. A religious vows to be at the disposal of God and to depend on YHWH like a **little child** who relies, for everything, on his/her, parents. Carrol claims that "A religious is not a poor person, but is one called in a particular way, within a community, with a particular charism, to become more and more a sign of dependence upon the Lord, and owner of nothing,

¹²⁵ I.G, n 43-47

sharer of all, in a love relationship with an incredible Jesus."¹²⁶ This is what the Gospel of Matthew is calling our religious people to emulate in the symbol of children.

How many religious have taken the image of a child (παιδίον)? Today, a good number of religious yearn to become superiors with self-centered ambitions, which is why sometimes there are unnecessary problems in religious communities. Consecrated life is to be a sign of the kingdom of heaven here and now. By embracing religious life a person becomes responsible for the good of the earth, the care of oneself and others; and this demands a kind of radical dependence on the Lord who will provide. On the contrary, noted Carrol: "Too easily a religious becomes a materially secure, communally cared for, irresponsible person, an unchristian person: the risk is real".¹²⁷ Thus, unless religious are converted and become like children they will not manifest the value of the kingdom of heaven as their life purports to be.

3.4 Small Christian Community: A Call to Become Little Children

The Small Christian Community is a place and a means of continuous conversion of becoming like little children. If one needs to see the effect of Christian life in the society, the Small Christian Community is the best area. This is because it is composed of Christian families who are trying to practise their faith in their daily life experience. Like a Small Christian community, Matthew's community was small in number, a minority community within the large dominant society, called to be the light of the world and a city on a hill that cannot be hidden (Matt 5:14). A city on the hill is the community of **little children** that radiates the glory of God by depending on God and caring for one another. I am convinced that it is in the Christian communities that the symbol of children can be fully actualized. This is because the Small

¹²⁶ I. Patrick Carrol, *Challenges to a Religious* (Bombay: St Paul Publications, 1991), p. 5-6.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Christian community is a privileged place for lay Christians to learn to take their responsibilities in the Church, or else the Church will continue to be for the clergy and the religious.

In chapter two we saw how the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is coloured by the children crying out to Jesus in the temple, "Hosanna son of David!" (Matt 21:15), which means, "Help, I pray." In a similar way, the children today are shouting, "Hosanna! Hosanna!" We may ask: "Who are these children crying?" Of course, these are the poor and marginalized women and children (in the literal sense) in our society. The Gospel, in the figure or symbol of **children**, is calling the Christians in Africa to recognize the rights, the dignity and duties of women and children. It is very rare to see a woman as chairperson in a Small Christian Community. It still stands in most Africa communities that a leader must be a man. Why can a woman not occupy the first place of service? It is high time women are given the roles of leadership in the church rather than dancing during liturgical celebrations and decorating the altars with flowers. In fact, many women should come forward and take up some responsibilities that they have left for men. Therefore, the Good News is that Christians are equal and need to share the responsibilities equally in accordance with one's gifts.

When it comes to the issue of children (in the literal sense) in the Small Christian Communities, there is a lot to say that will call the faithful to pay attention and act upon it. The Matthean Jesus puts it very clearly that: "Let the little children come to me and do not stop them" (Matt 19:14). But many of our children have been deprived of catechetical instructions. They grow with little or no religious instruction at all. This somehow shows that Christianity is for the adults and not for the young ones. Bishops at the African Synod proclaimed the Church in Africa in 1994 as the Family of God. What a family without children! The words of Jesus resound in the ears of African adults, not to stop the young ones from participating in church affairs. Like Jesus, the parents and elders have the duty to bless and pray for their children rather than keep on

grumbling about the young people being uncontrollable and hard-hearted. Most elders have a view that children are hard to teach. However, they forget that children watch and criticize and become like the adults with whom they grow up. Actually, the problem is not with the young people but with the adult children of God who refuse to grow up and want only to be taken care of rather than do the will of God, practising justice and mercy, and taking care of the poor. Within our Christian communities one can easily see that children are the victims of domestic violence, abuse of all kinds, malnutrition, homelessness, and lack of education and health care, and so forth.

In addition to what we have said, the situation of the poor people is very pathetic, such that it calls Christians to respond urgently to the need of their fellow Christians. The number of AIDS/HIV patients is very alarming. The number of the victims of AIDS/HIV, widows and orphans, is increasing tremendously. Like the **little ones** mentioned in the Gospel, these people are vulnerable and marginalized, hence the Christian communities are challenged to give witness by caring for the least brothers and sisters of Jesus who believe in him (Matt 25:40). God is present among them. Therefore we need to change our hearts and minds and put on that of a **child**.

3.5 Conclusion

Today it is not an easy task to become child-like in the African context. Nonetheless, there is no compromise with the Gospel of Christ for a true follower of Jesus who humbled himself and served his people at all cost. The Church in Africa needs priests, religious and laity whose lives are changed by the Gospel and live their lives in service of others, according to the message of Jesus as proclaimed by Matthew. Priests, religious and lay people all need to undergo *metanoia* and become childlike. We need all of us to have a conversion that involves childlike humility, as it was the main concern of Jesus in Matthew 18:4.

General Conclusion

The symbol of **children** in the Gospel of Matthew is a challenge to Christian living in Africa today. I strongly believe the very touching and endearing scene of Jesus and the children in Matthew 18:1-14 is central to the community's teaching about becoming like children. Moreover, it is this message I perceive as a critical challenge to the African Church to put these teachings into practice. Hence, from the work I have postulated in this paper, I am in position to say that for any one who would be a true disciple of Jesus, whether a priest, a religious or lay person, there are valuable lessons to be gleaned.

The message that comes from the symbol of the **children** calls Christians to a total freedom and dependence on God. By becoming like little children, one is made free from clinging to self-centered ambitions that disorient him/her from the Christian goal to holiness. Furthermore, a person becomes free to serve his/her fellow Christians. By so doing, a Christian becomes a co-creator and embraces the Kingdom of God. It is only by conversion and becoming like children, one realizes that, despite all the difficulties Africa is going through, God still reigns in the brokenness of the people.

From the first chapter to the last of this paper, we have seen that God manifests his presence in those who do not count in the society. God operates in such a way that he turns human expectations upside down. The child who is at the bottom rank in the society is uplifted and given the identity that belongs to the heavenly Kingdom.

The symbolism of **children** is that of humility, simplicity, receptivity, and sensitivity to the needs of the weaker members of the Christian community. It is on this basis that our Christian witness is visible in the life style of all church members, in particular the leaders and pastoral agents. In fact, our greatness lies in our witness value of being a follower of Christ. Thus, Jesus was not against yearning for greatness. However, he challenged his followers to have a form of

'greatness' that brings about the Kingdom of love and not a selfish greatness. Thus, when we have the little ones in our midst, it is the privileged moment for believers to encounter God in simplicity. Truly, **children** are the paradigm for building the Kingdom of Heaven in our Christian life, whether it be priestly, religious or in the Small Christian Communities. Hence, the symbol of **children** calls the African Church to a task of forming Christians who will be known as such, by the witness of their lives like **little ones**. This is a call for a deeper conversion to the Gospel that frees one from worldly attachments and plunges a person into the heavenly kingdom manifested by the deeper human value of love and caring.

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APPENDIX: TERMINOLOGIES

(From Clinton Morrison's Analytical Concordance, 1973)

Βρέφος: (Brepheos = Infant)

Matt 11:25 "... for revealing to mere children or babies."

Νήπιος: (Nepios = Childish or Babyish)

1 Cor 13:11 "When I was a child, I reasoned like a child."

Παιδίον: (Paidion = Young child)

Matt 2:8 "Go and search diligently for the child

Matt 2:9 Star ... to rest ... where the child was

Matt 2:11 and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother

Matt 2:13 " take the child and his mother to Egypt ..."

Matt 2:14 Herod is about to search for the child

Matt 2:20 "Rise, take the child and his mother ..."

Matt 2:21 he rose and took the child and his mother

Matt 11:16 it is like children sitting in the market place ...

Matt 14:21 ... were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Matt 18:3 ... unless you turn and become like children

Matt 19:14 "Let the children come to me"

Matt 21:15 and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna ..."

Τέκνον: (Teknon = Child)

Matt 2:8 "Rachel is weeping for children

Matt 3:9 "... able from these stone to raise up children

Matt 7:2 how to give good gift to your children

Matt 9:2 "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."

Matt 10:2 "... the father will deliver up his child ... children will rise against you

Matt 11: 19 Yet wisdom is justified by her children

Matt 15:26 it is not fair to take the children's bread

Matt 18:25 "... to be sold, with his wife and children ..."

Matt 19:29 "... left ... sister or father or mother or children ..."

Matt 21:28 "What do you think?" A man had two sons ..."

Matt 23:37 "... would ... have gathered your children!

Matt 27:25 "His blood be on us and our children!

Γαστήρ: (Gaster = Child used as an idiom: be pregnant/conceived)

Matt 1:18 She was found to be with a child

Matt 24:19 "Alas for those who are with a child

Παῖς: (Pais = Male child or Servant)

Matt 2:16 ... he sent and killed the male children

Σπέρμα: (Sperma = Offspring or Illegitimate Children)

Matt 22: 16 "... raised up children for his brother."