

There are several celebrations in today's readings: the celebration of marriage; the celebration of childhood and the celebration of continuity – our deep desire for regularity, and one can see how much of the scripture is written with this hope of finding an order or pattern in our lives – the technical term is aetiological – looking back from a present reality – the proliferation of divorce, for example – and finding an explanation for it in a story of disorder:

It was because you were so unteachable that he wrote this commandment for you

that is, it's a departure from the original ideal represented by the Garden of Eden and its creation stories, including the creation of woman from man. If we abstract from this its patriarchal bias we can see it as a celebration of man and woman's need for one another as equals – both created as *little less than the angels*: Christ then comes into the picture as one who becomes *for a short while made lower than the angels* so that he can become one like us *in all things but sin* and able to both share in our suffering and raise us above it – to visit this less than perfect world with its less than perfect marriages and show us a way through, even, as we've become increasingly willing to understand, through divorce and the puzzle of gender dislocation. And the way is one of humility – represented here by the child – again another ideal type.

We know, now, that, in his last years, Charles Dickens was leading a double life, having separated from his wife and mother of ten children and was keeping a young mistress under another name. Part of his frantic energy and acting out of violent scenes in his novels before public audiences in these years could well be seen as his way of coping with this inner conflict, but there are golden moments too. On one occasion, during his reading tour of America, a twelve year old girl sits down beside him in his railway carriage:

She told him she had read almost all his books, some of them six times adding, 'Of course, I do skip some of the very dull parts once in a while; not the short dull bits but the long ones.'
(Claire Tomalin: *Charles Dickens: A Life*. p. 368)

Dickens find this hugely amusing. Now I chose this passage to illustrate the ability of a child to penetrate human defences and speak truth to power – a celebration of being childlike as opposed to being childish and one thinks of such as Gideon and Nathanael, in this respect, in the scriptures: they say things as they are, like the little girl to Dickens, and the wonder of it is that, far from alienating God, their child-like nature is used by God to further God's purposes on earth. They are open to the possibility of change. In Dickens' case it reveals his essential humanity despite his sin. And that gives *us* hope, too, for the deeper continuity in all our lives, male or female, or in-between, is our creation in God's image, and ability still to communicate with God, to penetrate God's defences, as God penetrates ours, with the simplest of words, with the simplicity, that is, of a child.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour