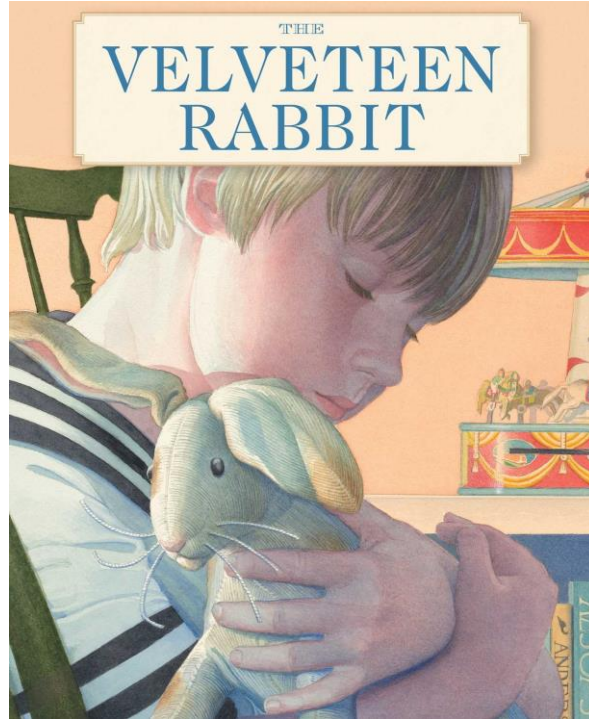


## Spiritual Maturity



Ephesians 4:14 "We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, (Jesus)."

*"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"*

*"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."*

*"Does it hurt?"*

"Sometimes." For he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up, or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or who have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby."

"But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand . . ."

I hope you all recognized those wonderful lines from Margery Williams' classic children's story, *The Velveteen Rabbit*. The idea of a beloved toy becoming real is a familiar theme in children's books. It is perhaps best known from Carlo Collodi's tale of Pinocchio. Such tales aptly illustrate for children the challenges of growing up and becoming adults. And the climax of these children's stories is usually the point when the beloved toy sacrifices its own life for its master's, after which the nursery room Fairy magically waves her wand, and the beloved object becomes real.

One of the disappointing things about being an adult is that it isn't like that in real life. There isn't a clear point when

you know you've grown up and become mature. When I was nine years old there were two boys who played across the street and who were fifteen. I thought they were so grown up and mature, that I knew that when I was fifteen, I would be finally grown up too. I was disappointed then and I have been disappointed many times since waiting to be finally grown up and mature. One of the frustrating things about being an adult is that we do indeed often find ourselves, if we are willing to admit it, still being childishly immature at times, throwing temper tantrums, becoming moody, gathering up our toys in a fit and going home, acting like spoiled children. Thus, there always seems to be for us more growing up to be done. I am afraid that it doesn't happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time.

In today's reading from Ephesians, St. Paul, who at the time of this writing was a prisoner in chains, is begging his readers to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. St. Paul is begging his readers to grow up and not be tossed about to and fro! Spiritual maturity is a process much like becoming real, or growing up physically or emotionally. Sadly, there is also no clear point at which we become fully spiritually mature; the Holy Spirit does not come along and wave a magic wand over us at our Baptism, or Confirmation, or even our Ordination. "That's why it doesn't

often happen to people who break easily, or who have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept." Rather spiritual maturity takes a long time and most often requires patience and self-sacrifice and some suffering through a lot of pain and disappointment. But when you are spiritually mature, you don't mind being hurt.

Yet oddly enough, when we think about who the inspiring leaders of the Church for us are today, we don't usually think in terms of spiritual maturity. We tend to think instead more about orthodoxy; about right thinking regarding the matters of our religion. We look for people who agree with us, people who share with our opinions and our version of the faith. The heroes of the Church, those to whom we look for leadership, are most often good preachers, the writers of books, clear thinkers, and good orators. We are looking to be inspired and reassured by their words and articulation, rather than by the example of their lives. We admire and ask for leadership from those who can verbalize for us the meaning of our faith, rather than demonstrating the practice of it. And sadly, we are often more scandalized by what people believe or do not believe, than by how they live their lives. And so, we are thus endlessly discussing and arguing about our religion, forever refining our thoughts and theological positions, our biblical interpretations. Consequently, our faith has often become more a matter of the mind, than of the heart. We may have gathered great knowledge,

but little insight. For we have become more interested in orthodoxy, than in holiness, despite the fact that Jesus did not give many commands at all about what we are to think or say, although he did give numerous commands about how we are to act and what kind of persons we must be and how we are to treat each other.

Holiness, unlike orthodoxy, is not an easy thing to describe or delineate, but it is an easy thing to perceive. There is in spiritually mature people a certain calm about them, an openness to the world, a willingness to share in the suffering of others, to identify with the rejected and the forgotten --- like St. Francis in the leper colony or Mother Teresa in the streets of Calcutta or Charles Lowder in the slums of Victorian London. These people are not looking to become church leaders or even saints. They are just responding to the needs of the world around them. They are not trying to save the world either; they are just trying to bear it along a bit. They do not flee from the suffering and pain in our world, as we so often do, but rather they see that pain and suffering as an occasion for love. They redeem it, and the result is a deep sense of peace with this fallen world of ours, and compassion for sinful man.

I don't believe that God has given these individuals a special grace, that God makes them holier than thou; rather I think that they have received the same gifts from God that we have all received; only they have made better use of them than we

usually do. They've grown up more than us. We are more like little children fighting about what we believe, and who is right. Perhaps we even prevent ourselves from becoming mature because we fear the cost, the vulnerability, the pain, the suffering; or because we don't value enough the gains of peace and holiness. Maybe we don't really want to become real; we don't want our fuzz rubbed off, and our limbs to become shabby. Maybe we don't want really to grow up at all. Perhaps we prefer instead a Peter Pan-like Christianity, where we never have to grow up and become adults, where we can stay and live with the lost boys forever in some fantasy world. But alas, the Peter Pan syndrome is an adult problem, for real children are all too eager to grow up. And so should we be. For as Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these because I am going to the Father." In the end, spiritual maturity is about what we do, and who we are, and not about what we believe. Amen.