

Counting diamonds: Mark 9:30-37

The Roman custom of lifting a newborn infant probably underlies Jesus's symbolic action in Mark 9.

by [Joel Marcus](#) in the [August 30, 2000](#) issue

Occasionally in the news one hears about an infant that has been abandoned by its parents—left at a church door, perhaps, or found on a side street somewhere, or even in a garbage can. If the parent or parents are found (usually in our North American context it is the mother), she or they are prosecuted. And we shudder and think, “What sort of heartless person could do a thing like that?”

In the ancient world, however, abandonment of infants was a normal practice, a postnatal method of birth control, and no particular stigma was attached to it. Oedipus is perhaps the most famous example—the heir to the throne of Thebes was exposed to the elements as a newborn because of the terrible prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Infants might be abandoned for a number of reasons, including illegitimacy, but usually they were simply the offspring of parents who lacked the resources to feed them.

As John Boswell has shown in a magisterial study, these parents were not monsters; they knew what Tennessee Williams's character Blanche DuBois knows—that one can usually rely on “the kindness of strangers” (the title of Boswell's book). Most abandoned children probably survived abandonment, because they were picked up and incorporated into someone's household. Sometimes the rescuers were infertile couples who had always desired children; sometimes they were people who simply needed an extra hand to help out with the work.

There does not seem to have been any formal ceremony by which abandoned infants became a part of the family. Probably the presumption was that, merely by picking such a child up and taking it home, a person assumed the role of its legal guardian. This informal arrangement mirrored the ritual in which a father would pick

up his own child immediately after it was born, thereby acknowledging it as his own and pledging to raise it. If, however, because of some scruple, he refused to lift the child, it would be abandoned.

This Roman custom of raising the newborn infant probably underlies Jesus's symbolic action in our Gospel text for today. In response to his disciples' secret argument about which of them is the greatest, Jesus says that the one who wishes to become first must become last of all and the servant of all. As an illustration of the sort of service he is talking about, he places a child in the midst of the circle of disciples—thus indicating that children, including abandoned children, are to be brought into the Christian community. He then embraces the child, which probably involves picking it up. This would remind most observers of the raising ritual just discussed. Jesus' actions, then, are symbolic of adoption; abandoned children are to be brought into the church and raised by Christian parents, not in order to exploit their labor potential but because the biblical God is one with a special concern for the poor, the homeless, the weak and the abandoned. Indeed, the early Christians were known throughout the ancient world for their charity, including their treatment of destitute children.

In our passage, Jesus goes beyond simply providing a model of such charity and links acceptance of such abandoned children with acceptance of himself: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." The wailing child in the garbage can is an image of Christ, and the way in which one responds to such a helpless creature is a gauge of one's response to Jesus. Christ is mysteriously found in the abandoned baby or in the vagabond knocking at the door, as in the folk song, "Tramp on the Street."

Ancient literature, like modern fairy tales, is full of narratives in which gods and other supernatural beings disguise themselves as human beings, sometimes as the lowest of the low, and roam throughout the world to see how people will treat them. As the Epistle to the Hebrews says, "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Heb. 13:2, KJV). In our passage Jesus uses this common folk tale motif to drive home the same point that is expressed in his most powerful parable: "Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, you have done it to me" (Matt. 25:40).

A student came into my office at a time when I was busy writing. I reluctantly agreed to talk to him, trying not to let my impatience show. My fidgetiness increased when I noticed how long it was taking him to get to the point. Suddenly, however, something about the student got through to me. I realized that he bore an uncanny resemblance in appearance, manner and voice to one of the great leaders of our age. And it came to me in a flash—this guy could turn out to be the next _____! And here's the next _____ sitting in my office, and I can't even concentrate on what he is saying!

Well, I don't know if that student will really turn out to be an incarnation of this person—but does it matter? “Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, you have done it to me.” Menachem Schneerson, the famous Lubavitcher rabbi from Brooklyn, used to stand every week for hours as thousands of people filed by to receive his blessing or his advice about matters great and small. Once someone asked him how he, who was in his 80s, could stand for so long without seeming to get tired. The rabbi replied, “When you're counting diamonds you don't get tired.”

The abandoned baby on the street, the stranger at the door, even our own husband or wife or child, is a diamond, and in receiving and treasuring these diamonds we are receiving the “pearl of great price” that was once hidden on earth as a destitute child of uncertain parentage.