

## Welcoming the Children - Robert Innes 20th September 2009

Jesus said: “whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.”

Chapters 9 and 10 of Mark’s gospel are quite serious stuff. In them Jesus makes a repeated prediction of his death in Jerusalem. “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him and he will rise again.” The mystery of the cross is being revealed.

Yet alongside and with this very grown-up material, there are sayings about the importance of children. Verse 36: Jesus takes a little child in his arms in a gesture of welcome. Verse 42 Jesus issues a stern warning against causing the little ones to stumble. And then in chapter 10 verse 15 he says: “who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” Just from the way the themes are interwoven, we get the sense that Jesus is particularly concerned for the welfare and salvation of the children. The cross and the child are linked. So today, as later in the service we commission our children and youth leaders, we’re going to think together about the place of children in the purposes of God.

All of us here today have this one thing in common: we either were or are children. That means we adults may think we know exactly what it’s like to be a child. After all, we can remember our own childhoods. But that may well be misleading. Because we only remember selectively. There may be quite long stretches of time about which we remember almost nothing. We tend to remember only the most emotionally intense experiences – the very good times and the very bad times. And we process and re-processes our memories in ways that are very different from the thought patterns of a child. What’s more ideas about childhood (what children do, how they should relate to adults and the wider society) change over time and across cultures – and have changed especially in Europe over the last 50 years. So that means that the world of our children may be stranger to us than we think.

These days, we are very interested in childhood. There are lots of books written about childhood, there are lots of books written by adults for children, and there are books written for children by other children. But if you go back in history, it wasn’t like this. There are many fewer books written about the lives of children or books written for children – and I’ve never come across a book written *by* a child from a long time ago. {if you have please tell me!} Children simply weren’t very interesting subject material. That means it’s quite difficult for us to imagine what it must have felt like, for example, to be a six year old living in Galilee in Jesus time. But one thing that’s clear is that for a long time children were defined by their limitations. They weren’t as strong as adults, they weren’t as experienced as adults, they weren’t as wise as adults. All in all they were worth less than adults. You can find a very striking example of this in the Book of Leviticus chapter 27. This is a table of the cost of redeeming a person who has been dedicated to the Lord. And you see that men were worth more than women, and adults were worth more than children. At the top of the table were the adult men worth fifty shekels, and at the bottom were girls under 5 who were worth just three shekels! Children were simply not yet adults and not yet worth as much.

Against Leviticus however, there is another and stronger current at work in the Bible which suggests that God doesn't discriminate on the basis of age. He does not divide the human race into adult persons worth more and child persons worth less. The psalmist wonders at a God who knew him intimately whilst he was still in his mother's womb. The Lord calls the young and inexperienced boy Samuel in preference to his adult mentor Eli. And when Jeremiah protests 'I am only a youth' God isn't bothered. God calls these people into a real relationship with himself, to a real vocation, not just to a vocation that will be realised when they are grown up.

And I have seen that in my own children. My kids have grown up in and around churches. Their faith has grown and developed too. But there was no magical age at which they suddenly acquired a 'real' and 'adult' faith. In the same way they have always served in church life: handing out books, reading, singing, tidying chairs. In my last parish there was a group of very elderly ladies who met together for coffee after church. My two older girls, who were then aged 10 and 12, managed to get themselves invited along. On the one hand, this adult attention made my children feel very special. On the other hand, the elderly folk loved hearing the fresh insights of the children. Children, as is often said, are not just the church of tomorrow, they are also the church of today.

If we go back 150 years the lives of children in Western Europe have changed hugely. Today, children are seen mainly as the recipients of adult care. In the first part of the 19th century, they were seen as essential contributors to the economy. The United Kingdom census of 1861 showed that 38% of the population was aged under 14 years. But 51% of the workforce was between the ages of 7 and 14. What is more, 51% of girls and 67% of boys under 10 were in full-time employment. I find that almost impossible to imagine. Of course, across the world today, especially in Africa and Asia many children still work – 150 million children under 15 work. But in Europe, factory mechanisation and compulsory education have moved the children from the workplace to the school. Where once children were once seen as economic producers, now they are seen as recipients of our adult education and care.

Now of course none of us wants to see our children working as chimney sweeps or tending looms and spinning machines. None of us wants to go back to the bad old Victorian days. But I think there can be a risk in our day of putting children in a position where they are just too passive, too constrained, too dependent on adults. Even in my life time, the amount of personal freedom enjoyed by children to move around, to explore, to adventure, that sense of freedom has decreased. At the age of 15 my uncles were young adults in full-time work, whereas my son is completely dependent on his parents. And so it is perhaps not surprising that one of the things that young people long for from us adults is 'respect'.

A lot of the Bible's teaching is good and wise, but fairly conventional – not so different from what you might find in wisdom teaching in other cultures. But with the big exception of Jesus words in Mark's gospel. Jesus welcomes the children over the adults. He says "whoever welcomes the children welcomes me". And when the disciples don't understand this, he then says: "Do not stop these children coming to me, because it is to children like these that the kingdom of God belongs. And if you don't receive the kingdom of God like a little child you'll never enter it."

The point isn't at all that Jesus regarded the children as sweet and innocent. The point was the conventional society regarded children as worth much less than adults – remember 3 shekels for a little girl, 50 shekels for an adult man. The disciples kept the children away because they just weren't important enough for the great teacher to waste his time with them. But Jesus turns their priorities on their head. The children are possessors of the kingdom. They are examples for the adults to follow. They are models for greatness in the kingdom. They are valuable in themselves, and they are to be identified with Jesus.

All of which is to say, that the church must take children seriously. One of the reasons I'm committed to infant baptism is because it stresses that children along with adults are full members of the church. And at Holy Trinity, we really do try to give the best welcome we can to the children.

Children don't come to church on their own, they come with families. And we know that when parents come here, usually their highest concern is whether the children will be happy. Lose the children and you lose not just the children but also the parents. We currently have around 80 children on our books at the 10:30 service. To look after them we have a team of around 35 teachers and helpers. We devote a lot of time and care to our children's work. The children meet each week in groups: creche for the under 3s, Climbers and Scramblers from 3 to 7, Explorers 7-10, Pathfinders 10-13 and CYFA from 13 to 18, using resources from Scripture Union called 'Light'. The younger ones have a joint worship and drama session followed by activities in groups. It is educational and fun, and the Sunday school have welcomed lots of new families in the last few weeks.

It is lovely when we can involve our children actively in our main church services. The voice for life programme gets children singing as choristers with us from time to time, and in November we're taking a group of children to sing in Canterbury Cathedral. A couple of years ago, we began admitting children to communion at aged 8, and this has been a real success so that children and adults can now share holy communion together. From time to time we have all age services which give the children opportunity to do readings and prayers. Synchronising the rotas for church and for Sunday School so we do things together stretches my planning ability to its limits – but I'm so aware that there's much more we could do. We are and should be a church for all ages.

Today we are commissioning those our children's leaders for the work of another year. They are in the front line of the welcome of our children. It's not always an easy job: our children come very different backgrounds, their knowledge of English may be limited, expectations of behaviour are different. So our leaders deserve our support. Not very long ago, Holy Trinity was wondering whether or not there was a place for children at our church. People supposed that our city centre location made it too difficult for families to find us. Well, we now blessed with many children. And how much poorer we would be without them! They are among us to give as well as to receive. We welcome them conscious of our Lord's words: "whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name, welcomes me."