

“Exhibit A: the welcoming of kids”

Reflection: September 22, 2024 Rev'd Ian Brown

Mark 9: 30 – 37, James 3: 13 – 4: 3, 7 - 8

Children are of no interest to the Gospel writers, except this once. I guess there was a gaggle of kids who hung around the grandmas, aunties, and mums supporting Jesus. We don't know if Jesus played and joked with the children. Did he listen to their hopes and dreams? Did he commiserate with the awkwardness of growing up? Did he see things through their eyes? Did they get special stories? Would he perhaps playfully reverse the power dynamics with a word here, a quick smile there, an inclusive gesture? I can imagine that.

“Whoever receives a child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

That's a big statement and it assumes Jesus familiarity with kids. It takes the powerless and puts them above others. It takes the insignificant from the periphery and places them in the middle. It's one of Jesus most subversive actions! And it's no accident it happens here.

In today's story there is an ugly clash of competition, perhaps a spill motion was brewing amongst the disciples and in a flash, Jesus takes a child, puts her in the middle of them and makes this point. Why a child, is a good question to start with. I like the poet William Blake's reflection on the nature of childhood as a beginning, to be a child, he says is;

'To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a Heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour;

But Jesus is not being cute about potential, he's shining a light on openness and lack of guile against their competitive thinking and their argumentative power model.

In some families the rule that 'comparisons are odious' is supreme, but for many, growing up is more like a marathon in a competitive gene pool. His or hers is better than, bigger than mine. He or she is brighter, better behaved, more outgoing and on it goes. Jesus shows us in this short story, that in God's family there is to be a very different set of values at work. Jesus teaching is about their competitiveness, a quality that may have some

good elements, but more often we see the worse come of it.

There were two traders who were bitter rivals, they spent their days staring across the street at each other. When ever one got a customer he would grin in triumph at his rival. One night, as often happens in fables, an angel appeared to one of them in a dream and said, “God has sent me to teach you a lesson. God will give you anything you ask for, but whatever you get, your competitor will get twice as much.

You can be wealthy, but he will be twice as rich, you can be famous, live long, whatever you like, but your rival will be twice that.” The man frowned and thought, he said, “Alright, give me one black eye.”

Competitiveness can be a terrible curse. I love the way Jesus deals with competition among his disciples. Rivalry can do much harm and the lessons to correct its influence might need to be dramatic! You might think of some other famous rivalries.

Imagine listening in to the disciples chatting. “I had Jesus over to lunch with my whole family.” “Oh, well he healed my mother in law!” and “But I sat next to Jesus 7 times in the last week!” - all that is written there between the lines! You can just hear the pettiness.

Little wonder that when Jesus got the disciples inside, he wanted to know what it was all meant to be about. They were awkward, embarrassed. But then Jesus doesn't attack their pettiness or give them a tongue lashing for their small minded bickering. His approach models his values, as much as his words.

We mostly attribute value to those who have power; it's about having wealth, political influence. People then attribute greatness to such people – because of their power.

Jesus turns this on it's head. True greatness is not about power. True greatness is to be like Jesus, he takes a small child and puts her in the middle of them. Women and children just slip naturally into the story at points like this and then with the child in the centre Jesus says, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes

me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." There's more than sentiment here.

Jesus was busy with important matters, so his followers quite naturally thought Jesus wouldn't want to be bothered with children. They would get in the way, take up his valuable time. The disciples thought this attention was all for the adults, for those who could understand, but Jesus wanted to broaden their minds. It was children, Jesus said, could understand better than the adults. He wasn't speaking about a sappy idea of the innocence of childhood. The kids were real; they had probably been disobedient and cheeky at times, like most kids and like most of us.

The first are last, the children are key people, welcoming the vulnerable and unimportant is vital in God's way! Jesus shows again and again that the values of God's kingdom are upside down to the way most of the world thinks.

The thirteenth century Sufi mystic-poet Rumi, writes of a young man seeking advice. The villagers point to a man playing horse with children. "He has keen, fiery insight and vast dignity like the night sky, but he conceals it in the madness of child's play." The young man asks the wise man why he hides his wisdom. "The people here want to put me in charge. They want me to be judge, magistrate, and interpreter of all the texts. The knowing I have doesn't want that. It wants to enjoy itself. I am a plantation of sugarcane, and at the same time I'm eating the sweetness." This is from Rumi's poem.

'Knowledge that is acquired is not like this.

Those who have it worry if audiences like it or not. It's a bait for popularity.

Disputational knowing wants customers.

It has no soul.

Robust and energetic before a responsive crowd, it slumps when no one is there.

Chew quietly your sweet sugarcane God-Love, and stay playfully childish.'

To "welcome one such child" is a challenging invitation, even when we have a UN declaration on the rights of the child. Every day we see images of children and their families fleeing war zones for their safety, taking dangerous journeys, unwelcoming governments, razor wire and tear

gas. Our world still has child slavery, sweatshop labour, full of under age children and children forced in to worse. What would it mean for us to not bicker about who is responsible and simply do things to help.

"Whoever welcomes one such child, welcomes me - and the one who sent me." Here in Australia, indigenous poverty affects children most severely and the symptoms of the hopelessness it causes are awful. "Whoever welcomes one such child, welcomes me - and the one who sent me" says Jesus.

And if there's a challenge here for us, then it's to think about what we do in answer to Jesus words. This is obviously about more than smiling kindly at the children we meet. This is a direct challenge to you and me, to help the small, the weak the powerless ones in our community and in our world. Jesus exhibit A for what constitutes greatness among mortals is not wealth or power. The greatest country is not one with the most secure borders. By Jesus teaching, it's the one that is most open to welcoming little ones. We know there are many of those who are now last, who need help, need aid – need to be put first. Helping the smallest, the least, the powerless is the mark of greatness by Jesus standard.

Where are we here now in this? There's what we do in our families and individually. There's our hosting of a Kindergarten, our running of a weekly Playgroup and hosting a young, vulnerable mums playgroup, we reachout to include kids and families with our Messy Church. As we listen to Jesus, this is important stuff!

The call to us is to reflect the values of Jesus in who we are and in what we do. To value the little ones, to welcome all and in doing so we have welcomed God. Amen.