

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 5th September 2021
Andy Banks speaking from Mark 10:13-16
'Jesus' Elevation of Children'

We're continuing our series in Mark's Gospel, asking ourselves the question Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" And, "What difference does who he is make to your life?" Today we're looking at Mark 10:13-16.

[Read Mark 10:13-16]

13People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. 14When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.' 16And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

[Pray]

In 2017, the most unlikely YouTube video went viral. It was supposed to be a serious interview with Professor Robert Kelly about the escalating tensions in Korea, amidst concerns over North Korea's nuclear weapons testing and newly demonstrated ability to launch missiles beyond their immediate region. But the interview was itself "bombed" by Robert Kelly's toddler dancing into the room, followed by his baby in a walker, and then his Korean wife hastily trying to retrieve them, after Kelly had tried unsuccessfully to gently push his toddler away from the camera. In a pre-covid world, where we weren't so used to the pitfalls of working from home with children around, this video became big news briefly. The BBC even interviewed the family about it a few days later, in which the parents, whilst continuing to try to control children who wanted to fiddle with everything around them, explained that they were particularly concerned that the original video might have blown their chances of working with the BBC again. But actually, what better illustration of the need for peace than two innocent and unaware half-Korean children interrupting the interview?

Nevertheless, any parent will know it can be hard to have a serious conversation with little children around. For they have an incredible ability to demand constant attention and to do the unexpected, which can sometimes be highly embarrassing. I remember a service at a former church, where the minister illustrated his point by confessing that he had what he called "a heavy foot" in his car – i.e. he was prone to driving over the speed limit. He then asked people to raise their hands if they had the same problem. Many hands went up, then clear as a bell a young voice from the front called out incredulously to his dad, "You do!"

It's interesting that, even in *our* culture, where children are highly valued, even arguably idolised at times, there are still situations where we want them to be seen and not heard, or even not seen and not heard in the case of Robert Kelly's interview! But the Israelite culture in Jesus' day was very different to ours. It was a culture that was *not* child-centred. In general, children would be affectionately treated within the *home*, but in *society* they were viewed as not yet "people of the covenant" – not yet true Israelites – because of their incapacity to understand and to keep the Law of Moses. Couple that attitude with the ability of little children to interrupt, act impulsively, and make loud noise when adults were trying to listen to Jesus' words, and you can perhaps see why the disciples rebuked these parents for bringing their infants to Jesus.

Of course, it does display a remarkable forgetfulness of Jesus' previous statement to them that they must *welcome* little children in his name, and that, by so doing, they would be welcoming Jesus himself (Mark 9:37). Perhaps that is why he was so indignant with them for blocking the children from coming to him. It's not as though they didn't know any better!

It's worth taking a moment to dwell on that word "indignant." The Chambers dictionary defines "indignant" as "feeling or showing justifiable *anger* (often mixed with scorn)." Jesus was *angry* here. He was incensed because his disciples were getting in the way of God's work, preventing people who wanted to reach out for Jesus' blessing from doing so. His anger was wholly justifiable, of course. It was a *righteous* anger. But Jesus did get angry. Anger is not necessarily wrong. Anger may be the *right* response if it is directed at injustice, or oppression, or unkindness, or malevolence, or that which hinders the spread of the gospel. Anger is a God given emotion that tells us that something is wrong, that a boundary line has been crossed. Of course, it can be destructive, if the boundary line is a wrong boundary line, or if the anger is out of control or disproportionate to the problem. But anger can also be good, acting as the spur to cause us to take action where we ought to step in on behalf of others, or for the sake of Jesus' name.

Jesus was indignant that people were stopping these little toddlers from coming to him! "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them!" What a powerful statement of the importance of children to Jesus! Jesus wants children around him. He wants them to come to him. He wants them to talk to him. He wants them to listen to him and to learn from him. He wants to bless them. Children, I hope you're hearing this bit, while you're doing your activities. You really matter to Jesus! He loves it when you share your thoughts and feelings with him. He loves it when you make tough choices to be known as his disciples at school and elsewhere, even if none of your friends are following him. He loves it when you ask questions that adults are too embarrassed to ask. He loves to hear you laugh, and he wants to comfort you when you feel upset. You really matter to Jesus!

And that is why, church, we say often that children are not the church of tomorrow – they are the church of today. Trying to minimise the risk of covid infection means that they are often out at the back from the start of the service at the moment, but I hope and pray that's not going to need to be the case for too much longer. Because the church is incomplete without our children being part of it.

So, Jesus strongly commands his disciples: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them!" Of course, there are more ways to hinder a child from coming to Jesus than to physically push them away. Like making services impossible for them to relate to. Or teaching about Jesus in ways that paint God as scary, rather than leading them to love him. Or if they see hypocrisy, with adults in the church acting in ways that don't reflect their profession of faith. Or worst of all, if ever anyone in a church had intention to harm a child – I pray that will *never* be the case here!

We are not to hinder our children from coming to Jesus in any way! Rather we are to *let* them come, and actively *help* them on their journey of faith, "for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." Letting them come means giving them space to explore faith at their level, not expecting too much of them too soon – or too little! In my experience children often have a greater capacity to understand about Jesus than we sometimes think! It means teaching them a rounded understanding of Jesus, not a watered-down version that will not equip them for the struggles of life. It means treating them with respect, including honouring the confidentiality of their prayer requests. It means giving them opportunities to participate and even to serve within the church. It means trying to answer their questions honestly and accessibly and being willing to research more if we don't know how to answer those questions. It means taking a genuine interest in each of them as people in their own right, and in the joys and struggles of their faith journey.

This is not the job of just their parents or children's leaders. It will not be the job of our children's worker. It is the job of the whole church. Not everyone has the ability to connect well with children, but everyone has the ability to smile and say hello, to try to learn their names and to pray for them. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a church to help a child to know God for themselves. Children need parent figures and grandparent figures as well as the friends their own age. Above all, they need people who will *love* them and be interested in them. "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." It really is a blessing to me to know that this is a church where these things are practised time and again, and I am very grateful for it – not just professionally, but personally.

But Jesus goes even further, shockingly so, as he declares to his disciples: “Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (v.15). Far from being a hindrance to the Kingdom of God, children are examples for adults to emulate! Jesus’ statement was like taking the pin out of a grenade and placing it in the minds of his disciples! These “*not yet* people of the covenant” were the very people Jesus said are the models that others should learn from in terms of what it means to follow Jesus!

Jesus never spelt out in which exact ways adults should seek to emulate little children. So we can at best speculate. But some of the best suggestions include their humility, their uncomplicated trust, and their purity and lack of prejudice. Take humility for instance. Little children generally don’t have grand ideas about their own importance. Yes, their world is very small and generally revolves around them. But that is not a pride thing – it is a *need* for interaction and reassurance. What a great place a church would be if the adults likewise harboured no ambitions for personal power and prestige!

Then there is the uncomplicated trust. If you tell a small child that God created the world, they don’t complicate that with all sorts of questions about exactly *how* he created the world, they just accept that it makes sense that God created the world. If you tell a small child that God loves them, they don’t need persuading that they are loveable enough for God to want to love them, they just accept the truth – God loves me and wants the best for me. If you tell a child that God answers prayer, they pray expecting God to hear their prayers. It’s only later that people start adding all sorts of caveats to try to explain away the painful experiences of unanswered prayer. There is something of the day-by-day, simple trust of little children that is good for all of us to try to recover.

And lastly there is their purity and lack of prejudice. Watch very small children in the playground and they will play with anyone. They don’t see the colour of someone’s skin or hair, they don’t see the gender of the person, they don’t see disability or learning difficulties, they don’t even see age. All they see is someone they know, or someone who’s available to play, and therefore someone who they want to be with. I’m not saying small children can’t be mean or selfish. Of course, they can. But it is not usually a reasoned, deliberate wrongdoing, or exclusion of others. It is more baseline instinctive than that. It is later that all the other societal prejudices come in to spoil things. And the Church should be a place where those barriers are deliberately broken down again – where we seek to unite together and support one another in our mutual love of Jesus.

We are, says Jesus, to actively learn from our children how to follow him. Of course, their faith must grow and mature as they grow and mature, but let’s enjoy and learn from their faith now, too. “Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” What childlike qualities do you need to actively cultivate?

[Pray]