

Mk 10:13-16

Let the children come to me

Tim Anderson 11/6/2023

Years ago, I had someone complaining because I give out stickers to children at communion. Their issue was that I wasn't blessing the children. "You should give them a blessing," they said. So I tried to drill down exactly what they wanted that would be achieved by a blessing that would not be achieved by giving out a sticker with a Bible verse on it. It turned out that the nub of the issue for this person was that I wasn't touching the children. In her experience, 'the priest', of course the word used was priest, the priest had always placed a hand on the child and said some words of blessing. And this is of course why I prefer to give out stickers. I don't want there to be any suggestion that there is a special priestly class of people who can dispense God's blessing by touching someone and saying some magic words. As far as I am concerned, that's superstition not Christianity. It takes away from faith in God as the avenue through which God gives his blessings. It takes away from God the decision about who he will bless and how. And it institutes a special class of Christian, Christians who can dispense God's blessings, which is something the NT goes to considerable lengths to say is not true. There are no special classes of Christian. We are all one in Christ Jesus. Which is a big change from the OT, so we need to work hard to make sure we are living in the NT.

Well of course, the heavy duty comeback this lady had is found in today's passage.

"Jesus placed his hands on the little children and blessed them, why won't you?"

Now for someone who prides himself on sticking close to the Bible, that's a hard one to answer, isn't it?

There is an answer, but it does seem like you are trying to wriggle out of it.

Firstly, Jesus lived under the old covenant.

There were priests under the old covenant, and those priests did dispense God's blessing.

Jesus was actually doing in this story something that was totally normal for first century Rabbis to do.

But just because it was normal for the Jews doesn't mean Christians ought to practice it.

The Jews lived under food laws -

I enjoy roast pork.

The Jews did no work on the Sabbath,

Christians are not required to observe the Sabbath.

Jews fasted regularly,

but Christians are not instructed to fast.

So there are all kinds of ways

that Christian living won't mimic Jesus' living

because Christians are not Jews.

Secondly, I'm not Jesus.

Jesus did all kinds of things that I will never do.

He turned water into wine.

He walked on water.

He raised dead people back to life.

He cast out demons.

He died on a cross for the sins of the world.

I won't be doing any of those things.

There's no reason to think
that we should try to mimic the details of Jesus' life.
We want to be mimicking the attitude he had to his Father.
We want to be following his teaching.
We don't need to put on sandals and walk around Palestine.

OK so the details of Jesus' life might not be important to mimic.
But we do want to put into practice what he taught.

What does this story teach us?

Here is principle #1.

Little children are important to Jesus.

Jesus' disciples thought

that Jesus had more important things to worry about
than the little children.

They told off the people

who were bringing their children to Jesus to be blessed.

But that made Jesus angry.

He wanted the little children to come.

I'm taking it from that,

that little children ought to be important to us also.

What are the barriers

to treating little children as important in the church?

Well, you have to be 18 years old to be on PC.

So little children can never advocate for themselves
in the places where decisions are made.

If you believe that self interest can colour decision making,
and you better believe that,

then children are necessarily disadvantaged
when it comes to making decisions.

And of course it's no solution to put little children in PC meetings.

They aren't equipped for it.

So it means that we always need to be intentional

about thinking of the needs of those who can't advocate for themselves.

What are the barriers
to treating little children as important in the church?
It's terribly sad to say,
that adults who sexually abuse children
have often had their perverted desires
preferenced over the safety of little children.
If Jesus got mad at people
who prevented the little children being blessed by him,
imagine how mad Jesus would get
at people who enable sexual abuse of children.
We keep needing to say this
because this problem will not go away.
If you think that WWC cards and police checks are going to fix it,
in the words of Darryl Kerrigan,
"Tell 'em he's dreaming."
The sinful human heart
has never been conquered by bureaucracy before,
what makes us think that bureaucracy will be a silver bullet this time?
One way to let the little children come to Jesus
is to be vigilant and determined in dealing with child abuse.

Why is it important to treat little children as important in the church?
I mean apart from the obvious fact that Jesus tells us to.
It's because children enable the church
to do what God commands us to do.
The church is basically an organisation tasked
with taking the good news of Jesus to the world.
Now a crucial component of taking the good news of Jesus to the world
is taking it to the next generation.
The church across the centuries
has passed the good news from generation to generation.
If one generation fails to pass the good news to the following generation
then there will be no one left to pass it on to the generation after that.
Who is going to tell the good news to Josh and Scarlett's children?
It won't be me.

I won't be around.
They are going to need to do it.
And so we need to equip them for that task now.

Church growth literature says
that something like 80% of people who become Christians
do so before they are 18 years old.
That means 4/5 of the results in evangelism
come from ministry amongst children.
We would be absolutely crazy if we didn't treat children as important.

Now I'm sure there are people thinking,
Yes OK but there's no danger
of us ignoring children's ministry at Holy Trinity
while Cherida, Emdwyn and Tim are around.
That is true.
I will make sure children's ministry is treated as important.
And Cherida will work very hard to minister to children.
Emdwyn will work hard to minister to youth.
But let's be clear,
we do that because Jesus says that children are important,
not because I like cuddling new born babies at playgroup.
I mean I do like cuddling new born babies at playgroup.
But that's not why playgroup is a focus of my energy.
We do things because Jesus says they are important,
not because they are fun.

Principle #1

Little children are important to Jesus.

Principle #2

God wants adults to have childlike faith.

When you listen to Jesus' words about this incident,
it's not directed towards children.

10:14-15 "Let the little children come to me,
and do not hinder them,

for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.
Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God
like a little child will never enter it."

Jesus is giving the adults a lesson about faith.
He's telling the adults about what kind of faith adults need to have.
Adults need to receive the kingdom of God like a little child.

Now what does that mean?

Jesus is not saying
that you need to be immature in your approach to faith.
Jesus is not saying that unless you chuck a few tantrums along the way,
you won't enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus is not saying that unless you tell your mother,
"I'm bored" at the top of your voice
and then proceed to misbehave all over the supermarket,
like the kid I saw in Aldi on Wednesday,
then you aren't getting it right.

What are the attributes of a little child that Jesus commends?
Basically dependence and trust.

Human babies would have to be
the most dependent in the animal kingdom.
Some animals basically fend for themselves
from the moment they hatch out of the egg.
You reckon a mother snake is looking after her young?
Hardly.
They better look out for her or she'll eat them.
But a human baby simply can't survive without being cared for.
And that doesn't just go on for days or months.
It's years.
In cases of some teenagers I've met,
possibly decades.
As my year 12 Chemistry teacher used to say
to students who were being pathetic in his class,
"Did Mummy tie your shoelaces up for you this morning, boy?"

The kind of faith that God requires of us is utterly dependent.
The paralysed man who was lowered through the roof
so Jesus would heal him.
He couldn't do anything for himself.
He was utterly dependent.
And spiritually speaking that's how we need to be.

It's no coincidence that this story of Jesus and the little children
comes right before the story of the rich young ruler.

It's not just here.

It's the same in Matthew and Luke.

The rich young ruler's story is the contrast to Jesus' command here.

He was desperate to obtain eternal life.

He said, "Good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

But at the end of the day,

he was depending on his money.

That's what made him feel safe in the world.

That's what made him feel important in the world.

And when Jesus told him to give it away,

he couldn't do it.

We won't go into that story deeply,

that's for next week.

But a little child is totally dependent.

If you are going to enter the kingdom of God like a little child,
then you will be totally dependent on God.

And that means not dependent on anything else.

Not your money, not your friends, not your job, not your family,
not your power and influence, not your brains, not your good looks.

We rely on God and God alone.

What are the barriers to us depending on God?

One of them is the position of respect we had in the community.

The recent Gafcon conference in Rwanda

was opened by the Prime Minister of Rwanda.

He wanted his photo taken

with a band of bishops from around the world.
When the political leaders treat the church with that kind of respect,
it's easy to trust in your position in the community
instead of trusting in God.
And we used to enjoy that kind of position in Australia.
Not quite to the same extent as Rwanda.
But Holy Trinity church is built on land we did not purchase.
It was given to us by the Victorian government.
The government decided
that churches are an important part of the community,
and more particularly the Church of England
was an important institution in an English colony.
So they gave us land to build churches on for nothing.
Can you imagine the government doing that today?
It's inconceivable.
It sounds nice getting stuff for free.
But there's a spiritual problem that comes with it.
It reduces the level of commitment needed be part of the church.
When people outside the church
give you a pat on the back for coming along,
there's plenty of positive reinforcement.
You can come to depend of the approval of others
instead of depending on the approval of God.
It makes for soft Christians.
Christians who get all panic stricken at the first sign of trouble.
Christians who aren't highly motivated or committed.
Do you think it's a coincidence
that the largest Anglican Church in Melbourne
is a church that doesn't own property and has to rent venues to meet in?
I don't think that's a coincidence.
They have to depend on God.

God wants adults to have childlike faith.
And that means we need to depend on him.
It also means we need to trust him.

Children are very trusting.
Trust seems to get eroded during your life
as people violate your trust.
But kids haven't had all the bad experiences.
At least most of them haven't.
And they are very trusting.
We have some quite high chests of drawers.
When my kids were like 18 months old,
I would get them to jump off the chest of drawers
and I would catch them.
I loved that game.
I loved them getting a rush of adrenaline
as they did something dangerous.
And I loved the feeling of them trusting me to catch them.

As we go through life,
it becomes harder to trust because people let us down.
But God never lets us down.
So why is it hard to trust God?

I have 50 years of seeing God's reliability.
He's always provided for me.
He's always looked after me.
Why is it hard to trust him?

It's because we like to trust ourselves.
It's not because God has let us down.
But we like to 'know' that we can get what we want
by providing it for ourselves.
We like to be independent.
It's stupid really.
It's like a tray of ice blocks
saying they would like to be independent of the fridge.
It's not going to end well for them.

It's a very good thing to express our trust of God in our prayers.
 Whatever it is that causes us anxiety,
 tell God we trust him to deal with it.

Lord,

I trust you to give me the words to say when I'm feeling defensive.

Lord, I trust you to give me the resources to provide for my kids.

Lord, I trust you to work through Holy Trinity Church
 despite its many shortcomings.

Lord, I trust you to work through me despite my shortcomings.

Lord, I trust you to give me the good health I need
 to do the work you have prepared for me to do.

Lord, I trust you to take me into your presence when this life is over.

Does trusting God mean we can't have questions?

Jesus says we need to trust like little children.

Do children ask questions?

You better believe they do.

Children ask lots of questions.

They ask questions that strike the adult as right out of left field.

But when a child asks questions,

That is not an expression of their lack of trust in you.

On the contrary,

The reason a child asks questions is because they do trust you to give
 them an answer.

They trust you not to mislead them.

They hope that you will make the time to address their question.

We can trust God with our questions.

Two principles from this story.

#1. Little children are important to Jesus.

That means little children need to be important to us.

No excuses.

That doesn't mean you have to like the noise they make
 or the mess they leave behind.

But it does mean you mustn't grumble

about the high priority we give to ministering to them.
#2. Jesus want adults to have faith like a little child.
That means we need to depend on him.
Not your brains, not your friends, not your money.
God is the one who provides and takes care of us.
Faith like a child means that we trust him.
We ought to be praying prayers that start like this.
Lord, I trust you to ...