

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 29 MARCH 2009

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Mark 10: 13-16

"Being Children of the Truth"

1. What does Jesus mean when he teaches us to 'become like little children'?

In our story in Mark 10: 13-17, when the disciples rebuke parents for bringing their little children to Jesus, Jesus gets really upset with them. Jesus receives the children and says the kingdom of God belongs to them. And then, he teaches that we can only enter the family of God if we become "little children".

What does it mean to become like little children? Some NT scholars say it means to be innocent and humble, just like children. I suggest that this is a naïve understanding of children and adult life.

On the train on Friday I stood near a mother sitting with two boys aged around 2 and 4. The 2 yr-old was frustrated with sitting on his mother's lap. He squirmed and complained loudly. So, she created a game with him that made him laugh. Now the 4 yr-old, who had taken no interest in them before this game, started pulling faces at them and poking his mum. He felt left out. He wanted to be noticed too. St Augustine in his *Confessions* reports a similar situation when a little boy is bitterly eyeing his baby brother at his mother's breast. These boys were envious. They do not want what their brothers *had*. They wanted to *be* their brother, gaining satisfaction, being complete. "Envy is the desire to be the other" who possessed completion and satisfaction. (Jean Wyatt, *Risking Difference*, 20f). And such behaviour is common to children and adults alike. It is the way we are.

2. Psychoanalysis tells us that relationship, family, community mean we will always have both cooperation and competition, conflict and envy. Studies have shown how unhealthy and damaging it is to avoid being honest about competition and envy. Denial of this just represses the envy and creates other kinds of hostile behaviours.

Jesus is realistic about this as he is dealing with the hostile behaviour of his followers, his disciples, who push children away. Only recently, in Mark 9: 33-37, we had a similar event. The disciples were arguing between themselves as to who was the greatest! And again, he tells them only a little child can enter the kingdom of heaven. This is about conflict, envy and competition. It is a reality.

The biographer of the great 20th century actress Sybil Thorndike shared on Late Night Live last week the wonderful story about her marriage with Lewis for 60 years. They were both very strong-minded people who had stormy exchanges, and when she was asked if she ever thought of leaving him, she replied: "Divorce, never; murder, often!" And that is the truth of life. We love, fight, and at times even hate those closest to us.

3. In our stories in Mark, Jesus accepts this human struggle in his followers. However, he also enters into dialogue with them to process this conflict, envy and competition: About what it means to be a leader; about the place of children in a community. The mum on the train did the same thing with her older boy. She gently challenged his poking and then she included him in the game. I was moved at her challenging compassion. And the boy *responded* to this.

This is what Jesus may have been suggesting when he taught that we can only enter the family of God if we become like children. That is, if we are *open* and *responsive* as children can be. Now children can be stubborn at times, but they are also open to receive care and are willing to change.

Conclusion

When Jesus is baptised a voice from heaven names him as loved of God. Jesus is seen and valued by God, as is all humanity through him. Jesus is open and receptive to the divine, even before he begins his ministry. The divine and the human enter into a relationship. And, this means that we have a true and trusted relationship in which God allows us to be real: to celebrate our cooperation and to confess and process our conflict, envy and competition. As children of God we are open and responsive to our real humanity, with all our beauty and our failing, always forgiven, always learning, never without the unseen mystery of God.

This openness of the divine to all human life is taught not just in the words of Jesus, but more so in his practice. He takes the children into the centre of worship and community life and blesses them. This means inclusion, value and importance of all: children, the smallest, the least and the powerless. But, because all humans tend to favour the strong and powerful, we are encouraged by our story to be learners: in our families, in our church, and in our society. To learn to deal with envy, conflict and competition. To learn to give up power where it is necessary, and to take up power and challenge exclusion where it is necessary.

Suzanne Pharr calls this learning, critical thinking: “it is the most important skill for the pursuit of freedom, equality and justice, and the greatest enemy of authoritarianism”. (*The time of the right*, 1996)