

St Michael & All Angels, Barnes

Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2018      Trinity 16

## **WELCOME A CHILD**

### **REMEMBERING OUR CHILDHOODS**

Can you remember what it was like to be a child?

Most of us have almost forgotten,

But if you think carefully enough, you may just be able to remember some of the impressions, feelings and thoughts you had when you were very young.

I can remember a few things –

The absolute terror of the dark in my bed at night.

The total bliss of being given a bottle of warm milk to drink.

Enormous pride at being given the honour of feeding the pet fish in the tank at my nursery school.

Children experience the world in ways that are immediate and intense, and it is something of this experience that Jesus asks his disciples to recapture in the Gospel today.

### **WELCOME A CHILD**

Matthew, Mark and Luke all include very similar stories of the squabbling of Jesus' disciples, and Jesus response of placing a child among them as a sign and symbol of what they should be.

He takes the child in his arms – an act of parental affection – and he places the child in the centre of the disciples – at the centre of the community of his followers – that is significant – the child is at the centre of the church.

The parable of this child is both literal and metaphorical.

It is literal, because Jesus really does mean to raise up the role and position of children as children. But it is metaphorical, because the Lord is also saying something much broader about the way Christians should be and live.

There is the natural awe, wonder, playfulness, innocence, openness and spirituality which we admire in children, that adults have often lost or forgotten. But children are also often powerless, vulnerable, weak, and lacking in status – it is this humility, taken on voluntarily, that Jesus also demands of us, as he

reveals to us the paradox of the kingdom in which the last shall be first and where the least are the greatest.

Matthew's version of this story includes an important warning:

*If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.*

Yes, Jesus is using rhetorical language, but there is nothing sentimental here – Jesus means us to take his words seriously, even if not literally.

The stumbling blocks for children – the things that prevent proximity to him – can be known by their presence but also by their absence. What is missing that being there would enable children to come to Christ?

I began by recalling my own memories as a child.

We must all make the imaginative leap, back to our own childhood needs and desires, so that we can help children today experience god. This is not an easy thing to do. As St Paul says, most of us have 'put away childish things', but what God demands of us is not to be childish, but to be childlike.

## **AWAY DAY**

Yesterday, the PCC met to do exactly this – as we held our Annual Away day, over at St Nicholas' Church in Chiswick – to reflect on our ministry among children.

We began by thinking back to our own experiences of church and the Christian faith as children.

For some of us, church was a weekly and compulsory activity, in which we learnt the faith with our parents.

For others it was the influence of relations, godparents, neighbours, school, or clubs, which brought us to church.

We remembered what attracted us; whether it was the music, the liturgy, the friendships – or even the stamps in Sunday School attendance book! We were reminded that every child is different, and we need to ask children what it is that matters to them if we are to help them grow in faith.

We also recorded what we already do for children in our ministry – and we noted some important things –

First of all, we already do quite a lot: Sunday School, Children's Masses, School services, assemblies, Baptisms, Confirmation and All Age Worship. We come into children and young people through our Hall and Centre, the Christian Union, and our new playgroup. Children take part in worship as servers and readers.

Second, we are fortunate that whereas in the country as a whole, a third of churches have no children at all, this is not the case at St Michael's. In the last 10 years, the number of children attending worship has dropped by 20% - that's 2% a year – but in London that decline is less marked and so our Sunday School has stayed roughly the same size for as long as anyone can remember. Nevertheless, we have to ask ourselves some important questions. What would it take, in terms of the resources allocated and the structure provided to increase our Sunday School from an average of 10, to nearer 20 or even 30?

On the day itself, we did not aim to come to any neat conclusions, but to inspire us we heard from three people who work with children on a professional basis – a children's worker, the founder of a forest Sunday school, and the diocesan children's ministry consultant.

I was struck by the thought that where the time, place and activity are right – children will come, and in large numbers – and they will even bring their parents too!

## **BLESSING THE CHILDREN**

There is another famous story about Jesus and children, in which people are bringing children to him to be blessed.

Why?

What did they want from Jesus?

Most of all, it seems to have been the gift of attention.

Jesus gave his time and energy to those who were considered secondary, and of little importance.

Today, we might think we do much better, but the abuse in society – and in the church as well – shows us that this is not as true as we would like it to be.

As a result, people often trust Jesus – but do not always trust the Church. More than ever, it is up to us as Christians, as representatives of the church, to show that we are as trustworthy as Jesus himself.

A striking feature of this story is that the disciples attempt to stop the children coming to Jesus, and so he gives them a firm telling off! The disciples are actually in the way of children coming to faith, by controlling access to Jesus. It is a reminder that is very easy for us to give children what we think they want and need, rather than what they actually want and need.

Ultimately, engaging with the faith and spirituality of children is for our benefit. Jesus tells us to welcome children in his name and on his behalf, because in doing so, we welcome Jesus himself. Jesus blesses the children, and through them we too are blessed.

After all, ours is a faith in which the fullness of God is revealed in a child, born in a manger.