

St. Paul's Dorking Small Groups. October 8th 2006

Keys of the Kingdom – Welcoming Children

Mark 10 13-16

Word:Key points from Sunday's sermon



Jesus is a man of strong words and feelings, as were his disciples : Here Jesus teaches us **by example** that children are key to our understanding of how to enter the kingdom of God. He draws children close to Him ,

Reaction of the disciples : **rebuke** the people bringing the children. The disciples are stuck in the old ways of thinking Children have no value, and are second class citizens.

Reaction of Jesus : **Indignation** akin to that of God in the Old testament : habkkuk3:12;Zepahniah3:8 nahum1:6; Jeremiah 10:10, in the NT: Romans2:8; Hebrews 10:26. This is a very serous matter.

Jesus says two thing and does three things : 1.Let the little children come to me, **do not hinder the little children**, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

We must make Jesus as accessible to children as we possibly can. We have a responsibility to communicate lead and guides with the Love that is from Jesus, we are not to judge, patronize, push to one side.

2.'Anyone who will not **receive the Kingdom of God like a little child** will never enter it'. We to have little children as our model. They are fully dependent on others and all things in life are received by them as a gift. They are good at receiving and trusting. In the parable of the soils the thorns that choked new growth were described as the 'deceitfulness of wealth', there is also the deceitfulness of knowledge' . they both mean that wealth and knowledge create in us a sense of power and control that makes us live as if 'we' know best' What Jesus says here cuts right through that mindset, and calls us to humility, to bow down to the little child and talk with him/her in a way that crates conversation, and on a basis of equal relationship.

3. Jesus **took** the children in his arms, **put his hands** on them and **blessed them**. We are to draw our children close to us, and to reach out to build relationship and to bless them, the **THEY** will be fruitful. Not to put a child on a pedestal but to get off the pedestals of status and power we stand on.

We are called to be followers of Jesus not producers of good works. We are tempted to introduce well structured programmes for the church family, to think of ourselves as producers, yet we are called to follow him as sheep do a shepherd. AS we follow so we find the whole flock, what ever their maturity, is following too. There is an interdependent relationship between all in the flock.



Witness:Questions to discuss

- 1.What makes us think that some people (including children) have greater value than others?
2. What does it mean to take children in our arms as Jesus did, to touch them and to bless them in our families, in our church family?
3. What light does the image of being a flock of sheep following Jesus throw on 'being' the Church?
4. It is not that we are to put children on a pedestal, but that adults are to get off our pedestals..How can we do that ?Use the following article to help explore ways in which we can further develop worshipping together as a church family (a number of these suggestions are in place already).
5. Where should children feature in family decisions and in the decision making proccess?

Worshipping with young children

- Alison Harris

Worshipping with young children. Delight or nightmare? My recollection of twenty-one years ago was that it was a nightmare! There was no crèche, no children's area, and I knew I *should* take a bag of carefully selected things to keep our younger daughter 'occupied', but we were always on the last minute and...and... and each week I vowed I'd be more organised next week. Much has changed and many churches now do have provision for young children and their carers in or alongside their worship, but, appreciative of it all as carers are, I am not sure whether our expectations have really changed. I wonder what the children themselves are 'experiencing' about the purpose of coming to church and of worship? I wonder what they are really experiencing about the significance of worship if they are given things to 'occupy' them whilst the adults worship? If they are given toys and books just like those that they would use in other times and in other places? If they are excluded from significant parts of the worship?

Young children can worship!

Part of the problem lies in our *expectations*. It is as if we feel we have to try and keep young children *amused* and *occupied* in worship until they are old enough to really understand and participate in it themselves. But young children do have some of the basic ingredients necessary for worship, for instance...

- they have a natural capacity for wonder, joy, drama, and spontaneity;
- they have a very effective memory for actions, so they can remember and repeat actions, and as language develops, words and phrases;
- they respond well to pattern, rhythm, routines and ritual;
- they have a natural desire to participate;
- they love to celebrate;
- they "make sense" of experiences intuitively through their senses and through their spirits before they can communicate their understandings and feelings effectively to someone else;
- and young children are spiritual beings, and I am told that many young children have a sense of God before they are three, even those who have not experienced a religious environment.

Rather than feeling that we have to merely *amuse* and *occupy* young children in worship, we need to think of ways that will help them to draw on these ingredients for worship and help them to participate in worship in ways that are appropriate for them. Young children need to know that they are coming to a place, a time, an occasion that is special and sacred *for them*.

So, where to start?

Well, first, let's get real! However secure and loved they might feel by the rest of the

congregation, left to themselves, most young children will not just intuitively exercise their 'basic ingredients' of worship all through a Communion service, or a service of Morning Praise. But the question should not be 'how can we keep these young children occupied?' but 'how can we help them to engage with God, within the community of the people of God, *as they are able*?' Whatever provision is developed for young children, the key question should be 'how will this help them to participate in worship?'

Young children are active learners. From birth, they are continually encountering new experiences, which they intuitively try to interpret and make sense of. Worship in church becomes one of those experiences in which they will intuitively try to interpret and makes sense of it, *as they are able*. We can't expect them to be able to engage in it as adults do, or make sense of it as adults do, but we can provide opportunities and materials which will help them to participate in the worshipping situation in ways that are appropriate for them.

The nature of the provision that you develop for this will depend on your own church's situation: the space you have available, the number of young children who come; the availability of leaders; are some of the factors that will influence the decisions you make. You may be starting from scratch or you may be trying to develop something that is already in operation; whichever it is, here are some ideas and issues to think about

Some possibilities

In some churches, young children might stay with their parents within the body of the worship, and the churches have provided *pew bags* or *liturgy boxes* as resources to help parents help their children to participate in the worship.

Some churches have developed *children's areas* in a part of the church where carers can sit with their children. Carers and children are still part of the service but the children have more freedom to move around. Some churches have sited their children's area at the back of church, in some they are in an adjacent chapel area, whilst in others, they are sited at the front so that carers can point out what is happening and children can see better. I know of one church that turned around the front pew on one side of the church, and removed the next few rows, to form a defined space for carers and young children.

Some churches have set up a *crèche* area in a room apart from the service. Some crèches are staffed by volunteer helpers, whilst in others, parents accompany their children. In some crèches, the children might stay in the crèche for the whole or part of the service, whilst others might offer a kind of 'drop in' time, a chance to calm a fraught moment, but with the flexibility to return to the service when carer and child both feel ready. Some crèches develop a pattern of worship suitable for young children and their carers that occurs alongside part or all of the 'adults' service', whilst in a 'drop-in' arrangement, the worship might be relayed through to the crèche area so that carers and children are still 'connected'.

Things to think about

But whatever kind of provision is going to work best for your situation, a number of issues need to be thought through:

The purpose of the provision is to help young children engage with God within the context of worship. If you are going to designate a space for young children, try to engender a sense of 'sacred space'. Include appropriate pictures and symbols. If it is in tune with your church's tradition, you could set up a child-height 'special table' on which you could place a children's bible, and/or a cross. Whether creating a special place for young children, or providing them with *pew bags*, *pew packs* or *liturgy boxes*, include only materials that have biblical or worship connections. Click on the following links for further ideas on setting up [children's areas and crèches](#) and [pew bags, pew packs and liturgy boxes](#).

The highest regard must be given to the safety and well being of the children. If you are going to designate a space for young children, it should be clean, warm, safe, attractive and uncluttered. Take care with the 'furnishings' – these could include child height tables and chairs, bean bags, floor cushions, a carpet – and resist offers of 'cast-offs' unless they are of a good quality. Anything will not do! Assess the potential risks: look at the space, the furnishings, the materials, and the activities, through the eyes and inclinations of the babies and young children who will use your provision. Be very clear about who is responsible for the children at various times, and make sure that all adult involvement conforms to your church's child protection policy.

Young children need adults to help them draw on their 'basic ingredients of worship'. Adults are crucial, whether they are the adults who are 'authorised' leaders, the carers of the children, or other people in the church community, and they all need support in appropriate ways. Carers particularly don't always realise how crucial their role can be in helping young children to participate in worship – they are, in effect, *assistant worship leaders* for their children. They are the ones who, being alongside their children, can help them to know when to stand, when to sit and when to kneel; they can offer them a hymn book when it is time to sing (true, young children won't be able to read the words, but they do enjoy imitating others!); they can teach their children worship responses (*Amen; And also with you*); they can encourage their children to join in with sharing the Peace, they can encourage their children to look at a children's bible story during the readings.

None of this happens overnight! Sometimes firmly held attitudes have to change; long-developed ways of doing things have to be addressed; finance will be needed. But if you have a vision for the way things might be, you can begin praying and planning for change.