

SERMON – 31/1/21
'Prioritising Families'

Mark 9:33-37

Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes in my name one of these children, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me but also the One who sent me.” (Mark 9:37)

One of the most interesting parts of the Growing Young process that we have been taking part in over the last few months has been the opportunity to reflect on our own church's story as we have spoken mostly with existing groups but also in random gatherings of individuals. We have asked people what they value most about the life of this congregation and what they struggle with most, and we have asked them to try and put into words their hopes and dreams of what we might become. We would like to continue those conversations in the coming weeks and so please be in touch if you would like to join a conversation on Zoom or on the phone. One day, maybe, we'll be able to do it face to face!

Growing Young is full of stories of churches. Let me share one of them this morning. First Baptist Church of South Gate in Los Angeles sits in a neighbourhood that is predominantly made up of Spanish-speaking immigrants from ten different Latin American countries. The children and grandchildren of those who established the church have been born and have grown up in the United States and in some cases these people feel as if they live a double life, trying to be as American as possible at school or at work while under pressure from their family and in their church community to be loyal to their ethnic heritage. Some of the younger folk in the church don't speak Spanish fluently and the church leadership began to wonder if conflict about language would tear them apart. They took the bold decision to take a big step towards the young people among them by moving away from holding services entirely in Spanish, even though some of the older members do not understand all the English phrases now being used. They have written: “We believe the future of the Latina church is to be multilingual, multigenerational and multiethnic. Care for the spiritual welfare of our English-speaking children and grandchildren forces us to adapt to their approaches and styles of ministry rather than insisting that they worship and serve God according to *our* linguistic and cultural preferences.” Prioritising children, teenagers and young adults has made

the difference for that church between ailing and thriving, not only for young people but for the whole congregation.

Now we may not face such a stark choice in our context but perhaps we have more to learn from that story than we realise – maybe we underestimate the extent of the cultural gaps that exist across the generations within our congregation and in the wider community.

It is into that scenario that we hear this morning's Bible passage being read, very appropriately by one of the youngest members of our church family. Jesus' disciples have been having an argument. It is human nature of course, but they were trying to get one up on each other, each of them striving for the title of who was the greatest among them. Now Jesus knew fine well what had been going on even though He hadn't actually been with them at the time and when He asked them what the argument had been about they clammed up. Patiently, Jesus sits them down and lays it on the line: "Whoever wants to be first must place himself last of all and be the servant of all." (v.35) And to drive home the message He gets a child to come and stand among them and tells them, "Whoever welcomes in my name one of these children, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me but also the One who sent me."

Now this is not a one-off teaching – it echoes things that Jesus says on a number of other occasions and so we in our time must grasp firmly something that takes us to the core of what it means to be followers of Jesus, and to be the church of Christ, in every generation and every context. It is clearly not an easy teaching for people to understand because even in the following chapter of Mark's Gospel Jesus comes back to it twice more.

Another day very soon after, the crowds were flocking round Jesus as usual and people were bringing children for Him to bless them. What did the disciples do? Did they welcome them? No. They scolded the people for bothering Jesus with the children. "Let the little children come to me and do not stop them, Jesus says, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these." (Mark 10:14) And He goes on, "Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." (Mark 10:15) Even then the disciples didn't get it. It's no time before James and John are asking Jesus to promise them places of honour when He is enthroned as King. "If any of you wants to be great, Jesus repeats, you must be the servant of the rest." (Mark 10:43)

And do you remember the parable of the sheep and the goats that we are told in Matthew's Gospel? There are echoes of this theme there too, although there it is not children who are being welcomed but the hungry and thirsty who are being provided for, the stranger who is being given hospitality, the naked clothed, the sick cared for and the prisoner remembered and visited. "I tell you, Jesus says, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these members of my family, you did it for me!" (Matthew 25:40)

The least one is the most important in Jesus' eyes; the one bringing up the rear will be first in God's Kingdom; the servant will be the greatest in God's estimation. And that *has* to challenge our ways as individuals and as a church – all of us.

And it prompts me to raise three questions for you each to think about today and for us all to ponder as we seek to shape what Kinross Parish Church is going to be in the months and years ahead.

Firstly, what will it mean for you personally and for us corporately to welcome children in Jesus' name, and not just children – also teenagers, young adults, whole families – and actually not just the young but anyone who might actually feel themselves to be 'the least important' – the hungry and the thirsty, the stranger or the newcomer, the one who doesn't think they fit in because they don't have the right clothes or the right way of talking, or because they don't have it together and they need care, or because they are in a prison whether of their own making or of society's and they need someone to reach out to them. Jesus says, If you welcome them you welcome me and if you welcome me you welcome the One who sent me. Just how much are we missing, I wonder, when we make it hard for people to break in to an expression of church life that we are comfortable with and where we rule the roost. Often, often, often goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.

Secondly, if Jesus asks us not only to *welcome* children but to *become* like children, what will it mean for you personally and for us as a church community to receive the Kingdom of God like a child? This takes us to the very heart of our calling to follow Jesus – we need to embrace eternity with the openness of children; we need to trust the Lord with the willingness of a child; we need to depend on God as unselfconsciously as children. When it comes right down to it, the message of the Gospel is too

simple for our adult thought processes – we overthink it and get tied in knots in a way that children just don't. Here it is: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. No ifs and buts, no reason to hold back from receiving it like a little child. **God** – loves – you. God **loves** you. God loves **you**. Just accept it – receive the Kingdom of God like a child because it changes everything.

And it takes Growing Young to a whole new level, because once we are finally willing to let go of our adult hang-ups and our vested interests, and just *be* as children of God, it will allow us as individuals and as a congregation, to put ourselves last in the pecking order and to be servants, not only servants of God, going wherever He may lead us, but servants of one another.

I am fully aware that the word 'minister' literally means a servant and I am acutely conscious that I need to model that in the leadership that I give as well as in the acts of service that are part of your expectation of me. As I got ready for bed last night a passage of Scripture came to me out of the blue – I don't know when I last read it, but as I turned it up I realised that it encapsulated for me the kind of dream that has been emerging during our Growing Young conversations of what this congregation could and should be. The words are from the 8th chapter of the prophecy of Zechariah, written to the Jewish people in exile in Babylon dreaming about their return to Jerusalem. I close this morning with a few verses of it but I encourage you to read the whole chapter after the service.

"The word of the Lord came to me. This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her. I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City, and the mountain of the LORD Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain. Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of their age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there. It may seem marvellous to the remnant of this people at that time, but will it seem marvellous to me?'

This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In those days, ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, "Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you."'" (Zechariah 8:1-5 & 23)

So let us welcome the children and the least important of this world in Jesus' name; in fact let's become like them, children and servants of God, and let's see what kind of future God will lead us into, a future in which many will draw near because they have heard that God is with us.