

Chrism Eucharist 2019

2 Corinthians 4:7-18 and Mark 10:13-34

“People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them.”

Now when did Jesus’ disciples get the idea that it would be an offence worthy of a rebuke to bring your children to meet Jesus?

“When Jesus saw this he was indignant.”

There were plenty of times when the disciples got things wrong – sometimes on their own, sometimes together – but there are very few instances when the Gospels’ record that Jesus was ‘indignant’ with them. It’s a very strong word.

Why have the disciples got this so wrong? It’s already clear to them that the poor and weak have a central place in Jesus’ mission. So why are they so confident that little children should be kept from bothering him?

The answer is not because of the noise and mess that the children might create or that the disciples had forgotten to bring the colouring sheets with them that day. ‘Hey Philip, just give them all a sticker and send them away.’ The issue is a deeper and more sinister attitude – an attitude problem that Jesus is addressing the whole time on the way to the cross.

While *his* eyes are fixed on serving to the point of sacrifice, they're preoccupied with the question of status. While Jesus is talking about rejection and death they're still thinking of a movement in which powerful leadership will be everything.

The idea that God's kingship will come about through defeat, where the first are last and the last are first, is not something they get their heads around very easily.

So Jesus said to them, *"Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."*

Jesus is not saying children are special because they look so cute and sometimes say the funniest things about God and the church in their innocence. Neither is Jesus saying children are important because otherwise who will take on leading his mission when the disciples are gone. Nor was his teaching point 'get the kids, and you get the parents.'

Jesus singles out children because they are not only at the lowest point in the social scale, without any status or rights of their own, they're also completely dependent on the care of others without any right of self-determination.

What Jesus is doing is reversing the conventional value-scale by giving importance to the unimportant. And so the disciples' attitude to children is the ultimate test of whether they have really understood the kingdom of God.

“Truly, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

Down through the ages this short episode has had a very important role to play in guiding the church’s attitude to children and the priority that should be given to their spiritual welfare. And in an age that has tried idolizing children at the same time as exploiting their commercial value as consumers, the implications of this reading is very stark for the church today.

This is the ultimate test of how much status and self-importance really matters to us. Jesus was saying that his followers must abandon status, power and position – with all its many disguises – just to get started in the kingdom of God, let alone play a full part in his eternal purposes.

The rich young ruler understood this perfectly well. His wealth gave him security and great prospects for his future. And though he lived a transparently good life, he was not prepared to lose his status.

Truly, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

There are 162,000 children under 11 living in our diocese. And every one of them is hard-wired for adventure, created to be full participators in the advancing kingdom of God. Our part, our privilege, is to remove any obstacle that might hinder them from meeting and knowing Jesus.

It is time to clear the way for a new generation of super-heroes [*organ plays Superman Theme by John Williams as children run to the front of the Minster dressed as superheroes*]

I wanted to make this as memorable as possible.

Whether or not you had a superman cape growing up. All of us were born with a desire to be great. We come out of the womb designed with that purpose - screaming for a life of meaning and significance. We grow up dreaming of a life that is 'a story worth telling'. We want in some way to leave our mark on the world – to leave it better than we found it.

That's why if you ask a small child at 4 or 5 what they want to be when they grow up – none of them say 'I want to be an accountant' or 'I'm thinking of insurance', or 'I feel a pull to the civil service'. (Though as adults we know you can serve God heroically in these jobs). They say things like I want to be an 'astronaut, or fire officer, or a dancer, or football player, or an explorer, or a secret agent, or a racing driver.'

As far as they can understand the world, children are born with a desire to do something that matters – something that will really count.

We are all born this way, and over the years we might ignore this desire or suppress it or deny it or lock it away, but it's unshakable. It won't go away. No matter how hard we or others try to crush it, it's still there, from our very first breath until our last breath.

Because the desire to be great and the desire for glory is put there by God – it's part of being made in his image. The problem is not the desire itself but what happens to it: it's born with a fatal flaw – called the sinful nature – and in no time at all growing up, the God-given desire for greatness is distorted into the desire to be thought of as great. And the childlike desire to serve and save others becomes a desire to serve and save ourselves. That was the battle for the disciples all the way to the cross.

I've been inspired recently by a book written by a pastor and teacher called John Mark Comer. He writes this, *"So many of us end up trying to live the wrong kind of dreams. Flat, one-dimensional, anaemic dreams where the story is all about us. Where we're the hero."*

He goes on, *"How do we live in this tension between our childlike dreams to be and do something that matters, and our more adult, ugly desires for power and control and status, a better job, a bigger house, a more exciting holiday, another leg up in the world?"*

Being a follower of Jesus is about learning to live well in this tension, because we will never escape it. It means learning to walk by the Spirit, and to re-orientate our God-given desires, so we are pursuing greatness and glory by pursuing Jesus – even though it will mean descending the ladder of self-importance and self-preservation, to serve the greater purposes of God. This is the way of the cross.

If we don't discern this battle in us-and-around-us then we set ourselves on a course to perpetual disappointment and frustration in life and in ministry.

I would love to give each one of you a super-hero cape, if I could! Because you have not given up fighting this battle, inwardly and outwardly, pursuing the things that matter most to Jesus. We may be worn down at times, and we may fail at times, but we do not lose heart.

“For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

Through prayer and the power of the Spirit let's do all we can to clear the way for every child in this diocese to meet and know Jesus for themselves.

These past months, I've been so inspired working closely with 28 churches who are part of the YoungLIFE learning communities, seeking to make a bold step change in this area of mission. As well as for the many outstanding headteachers and staff in our schools who share the same values and gospel vision. In particular I give thanks to God for Nick Harding and for his dedication and passion to this ministry as Diocesan Children's Advisor for 17years. Also for the army of volunteers who support children's ministry in parishes and for our children's workers. Going forward let us pray we can add many more evangelists, pastors and teachers to this company of servants of the gospel.

Whatever it takes, we must not allow it to be a postcode lottery whether children hear about Jesus, or depend on the school they get into, or the religious inclination or social status of their parents.

Whatever hopes and dreams they carry inside them, whatever struggles and temptations they are wrestling with, they are not a problem waiting to happen, they are not an educational statistic or an exam-machine, they are not a polished trophy to adorn a picture-perfect Christian family, they are not defined by success or failure in the image-obsessed world of social-media.

Every child in this diocese is unspeakably precious, made in the image of God with breath-taking potential to make a difference in the world and share an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs any amount of trouble they will face.

And the good news is they don't need to save the world and neither do we – Jesus has already done that – he did it on the cross and did it on that first Easter morning. This is the reason for the ministry we all share, and to which we renew our commitment tonight.

And so I leave the final word to a super hero, Wonder Woman, which seems appropriate in the 25th anniversary year of the ordination of women as priests; towards the close of the 2017 blockbuster movie she says:

“I used to want to save the world. To end war and bring peace to mankind. But then, I glimpsed the darkness that lives within their light...Something no hero will ever defeat. And now I know, that only love can truly save the world. So I stay, I fight, and I give, for the world I know can be.”

Let's pray

Gracious heavenly Father, you so loved the world that you gave your one and only Son. In this Holy Week, may we walk more closely in your footsteps as we seek to love the ones you came to save. And to lead and serve others in such a way that reflects your goodness and grace to people of all ages in our parishes and across the diocese, in a time of unique challenge and opportunity for our nation. To your name be glory and praise forever. Amen.