

Children & the Kingdom of God Baptism Sermon on Mark 10: 13-16

13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14 But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' 16 And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Sisters and brothers,

this story always reminded me a bit of a film star, or the Pope or some such person with his bodyguards. There is this Very Important Person, to whom people would like to take their children to be blessed, and those who accompany the star and refuse the parents and children access to the famous man.

By not letting the children through to Jesus the disciples clearly state what minor value children have in their eyes. And with that they are simply influenced by their time and culture. Children are worth nothing. And they definitely have no need to get in touch with Jesus.

Jesus is precious and holy, so holy that he should not be touched by these ordinary little human beings... By devaluing the children the disciples devalue those who bring them too. The crowd of ordinary people streaming to see Jesus are so shown that they are not worth of seeing this great man who the masses already love and honour.

Nevertheless, people at all times seemed and seem to have an understanding or expectation of an honourable person's touch being something special, something precious and maybe also something healing and blessing...

In the so-called children's gospel the "star" is not at all happy with the reaction of his bodyguards. He notices the disciples' behaviour and gets angry about it. His demand to end the blockage and let the people – often we tend to think it's mainly moms and kids – through, brings the dramatic turn in the story.

And it seems Jesus does not only wish to present himself as a child-friendly Jesus who may be touched, but tries to change the whole thinking about children which was common in his days.

Jesus is the only one in the story who does not treat the children as objects, as someone who something is done with or done to... The parents bring their children, the disciples resent them, only Jesus motivates the children themselves to do something. He does not tell the disciples to let the parents bring their kids, no he says literally "Let the little children come to me..." Here in his sentence the children are the subjects – well not grammatically, but you know what I mean... The children are the owners of their lives, their dreams, their wishes...

The children are enabled, permitted and invited to come to Jesus. There is a big difference to the way ancient society, and in it the parents and the disciples treated the children! Children in Jesus' eyes are recognised as fully valuable human beings who know what is good for them. They may be small, weak, in need of help and care, but fully human and worthy.

God who we see in the Jesus of the gospels is never building up divisions or walls, he or she is always walking towards the people – the poor and needy, the small and ordinary, the unimportant and rejected... God's holiness shines in his loving solidarity with the people in the depths of earthly life. God is never outside the human story. She is right in there with the weak and powerless, the suffering and the poor.

With this understanding of God we find a second little language revolution in the text. Jesus does not only address the children as the owners of their young lives, but clearly declares them to be the owners too of the kingdom of God!

And this does not mean that one day, in the far future, when these little ones will have grown up, that then they will enter God's kingdom and be part of – as Desmond Tutu would say – God's great dream for all humankind. No. The kingdom of God which Jesus speaks about is right there – present then and there...

The kingdom of God is not hidden in a far away future, it is present, it is happening everywhere where God's will is done on the earth... And when Jesus heals the sick, stops their demons, and eats and drinks with the outcasts of his day, when he welcomes the children, he is beginning to help God's dream come true and showing us how to contribute with our lives and in our days to bringing about the kingdom.

Jesus was not a politician, but his message had genuine political aspects. In the Roman Empire with the Emperor in Rome you could not speak about a "kingdom" without somehow bearing the Emperor in mind. So speaking of God's kingdom clearly stated that there was someone, something just as "big" as the emperor – or even bigger, more important, greater...

Loyal subjects of the Roman Emperor were expected to see God in the emperor or at least to see the emperor as the image of God...

We know that Jesus' God has no signs of an emperor on a throne in Rome. Jesus' God is no royal God, but a God of the poor and starving, a God of the grieving, a God of the women, the slaves, the powerless, the sinner and tax collectors. Jesus' God is a God of those without power and might and status – a God of the children...

In Jesus' speech about God, the Roman world order (the pax romana) loses its godly authority. The power of the mighty is no longer the way of God's kingdom coming true. God is now coming in the lives of the very ordinary people...

But back to the children – it's of course my focus on them today...

If Jesus identifies children as those who the kingdom of God belongs to, he makes them all princes and princesses in God's kingdom. He overthrows the traditional order by making the lives of children extremely valuable and important. This was a revolution in ancient times.

God's preference for the small and ordinary questions all systems of power then and now which see God exclusively on the side of the powerful and the mighty. Jesus puts his God on the side of the marginalised and discriminated against.

Every Jew in the Roman Empire was right-less and oppressed. And if Jesus made the children of this oppressed and powerless group to the heirs of God – if you like – he places God clearly with the most minor and powerless of this oppressed people.

Especially their lives, their little lives are supposed to mirror the presence of God in this

world. For Roman, Jewish and Greek thinking of the first century this was a risky transformation of the common tradition.

When Jesus says that children own the kingdom of God, he does not only mean it is them who posse it. No. He points out that the children are the ideal of a human being belonging to God. The smallness of children becomes what God favours most. And he (v15) invites all people, great and small, young and old, to enter God's kingdom or whatever we want to call it just as a child would do.

But what does this mean? Just as a child would do?

What is surely not meant is, that we now unpack all our romantic images of happy childhoods which we may bear somewhere in our memories... We have to look a bit into the context of the ancient world and the status of children there.

Children were small, without rights and powerless, objects of other people's doing. They were the last in the hierarchy of society.

God declares them to his favourites, his darlings, if you like... at the centre of his love. In God's eyes they were / are people with a future. They are part of God's vision of a new order for this world. In God's eyes they are rich, their suffering will end, and their hunger be stilled.

In God's kingdom all human hierarchies are turned upside down...

This is not only a message to the children. It is not only uplifting news for the poor and meek.

It is a challenge to all those who are not children anymore. It is a challenge to all those who are not poor and oppressed but have their fair share of power and success in this world.

They are asked to change their ways of life, their philosophies, their images of men, women and children and their approach to power & wealth... - just to name a few.

If you are small in the order of this world, you are great in God's kingdom.

Then you can become a prince or a princess in God's world.

What can this mean?

Let me try to give us one example: The example of children – because it is a baptism Sunday today.

Too often in this world the life of children is in danger, their well-being at risk. I cannot forget the pictures of the millions of refugee children here in Europe but also in other places. I cannot forget their sad and tired eyes, their sore feet, the rucksacks they carry and the inappropriate shoes they wear. I cannot forget those who are so small that they should surely not walk for 10 and more miles on an unknown Eastern European country road until a bus takes them all in and drives them to the next fence or the next border. I see them, too heavy for their moms to carry, but far too young to face all the hardships of a journey which often has no happy ending.

Where do we take the children seriously?

How do we care for them?

Do we hear the voices of our children? Do we care about their lives and futures?

Do we offer them education towards a self-determined life and further their self-confidence?

Or do we, as the people in the Jesus story did, just take them to places and spaces which we find good for them, but not let them determine themselves where they want to go?

“Let the little children come to me...” says Jesus.

How do we fulfil what Jesus asks people to do then and now?

How do we raise our children? Value them and support them? Nurture their faith and help them have a real childhood rather than having to become little well functioning adults far too early in their lives?

Are our children really allowed to be children?

Can they grow up without violence, poverty, hunger, harm?

What about God coming to this world as a child?

And living in this world in every child?

“Do not chase away the children,” Jesus says in Desmond Tutu’s children’s Bible. “Let them come to me. God loves children, and when they smile, he smiles; when they laugh, he laughs; when they cry, he cries.”

Let us not make God cry...

Let us make God smile by offering the children of this world a happy and peaceful childhood.

It seems so easy.

Why are we so slow in its realisation?

I believe that it is in the quality of the lives of the children of this world, where we can see how far the kingdom of God has come true, and to what extent God’s great dream of a world of justice and peace is being fulfilled.

May the children here in this church, may Lara and Alexander, and all our kids, see a glimpse of God’s kingdom because they meet us... and find in us role models whose lives reflect the beauty of a life in the love and the peace of God.

Amen.