

JESUS AND THE CHILDREN

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There are only two incidents in the Gospels which involve children. There is one we sometimes read at baptisms which tells how the disciples tried to keep children away from Jesus, how furious he was, and how he insisted on taking them up in his arms and blessing them. And there is the one we have just heard which tells how Jesus took a child and held him or her up as the model Christian. "I tell you unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven".

There are no stories anywhere in the Gospels which speak more eloquently of the humanity of Jesus. We treasure them as glimpses into the warmth of his personality. But what of the point that Jesus is making? In what sense is a child a model for all of us?

I have to begin here with a health warning. There was a time when I regarded myself as a bit of an expert on children – then I had some and since then I've found parenting rather less simple. I am reminded of the minister who used to be very fond of a sermon of his called "10 commandments for parents". Then he had his first child and revised the sermon. "Some suggestions for parents". After his second child he revised the sermon again "A few hints for parents". After his next child he gave up the sermon altogether!

None the less many of us here have some experience of children. So out of our shared experience lets see if we can think a little of children as models for the kingdom. Perhaps we can begin by getting out of the way some possibilities that I'm sure simply don't work.

For example could it be that children are models of moral virtue and we should all try to be good like they are? I think not! For example some of you are teachers. When you go into a class is it your expectation you will come away awed by the finer points of their moral purity? Let me cast stones at no-one but myself. When I was about 8 there was one little girl I used to play with a lot. The other day my parents found themselves sitting next to her at something like a golden wedding. Apparently she spent the entire time regaling them with horror stories of what I had really been like as a child. "Yes I remember Martin. He was always pulling my hair and tearing my hair ribbons. And when we played cricket he always wanted to be the one who was batting. He said girls were only there to bowl. My mother said don't you ever play with him again. You'll only come home crying". Well I have very little memory of any these incidents. But I do accept it's improbable that whatever I was as a child a model of moral purity was probably not it.

Another idea I suppose might be this. That children have not developed a critical faculty. They will believe whatever you tell them without question. We should be like that with God. There are two problems with this. First I suppose it is true that very young children do not yet know enough to know their parents sometimes get it wrong. But in my experience they pass out of that phase very quickly. Before long they ask questions. Why. Why. Why. They ask. Soon they are questioning everything. How old was my son when he asked me how the book of Genesis's could be right when there was no reference to dinosaurs in it. 7? 8? The idea that children just believe whatever you tell them is a complete non-starter.

In any case even if it were true would it be a good quality for an adult to have when it came to faith. If an adult simply accepts whatever they are told in an unquestioning that's a sign of stunted development not of profound faith. "When I was a child" says Paul "I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, when I became an adult I put an end to childish things". Elsewhere in the same letter he becomes infuriated with the Corinthians because they are going in for worship which is utterly gormless "Brothers and sisters do not be childish in your thinking... in thinking be adults".

So it's not that children are perfect models of moral purity. It's not that thinking in an adult way doesn't belong in religion. So what is it about a child that gives us a clue to the kingdom? Well let me give you two possible answers though I think there may be more.

The first thing is this. If you are going to understand this saying you will have to drop many of our modern ideas about children. Those of us who are parents often have lives which are child centred. It wasn't like that then. In the pagan world if you had a child you would expose it on the rubbish dump, especially if it was a girl. We have a papyrus from 1 A.D. from Alexandria in Egypt. "Hilarion to his sister Alis many greetings. If you bear a child, if it is a boy let it be, if it is a girl cast it out to die". Sometimes such children were saved from the rubbish dumps to be slaves. The Jews were tenderer, they did not practice infanticide. But still to be a child was to be a nobody. It was an insult to compare an adult with a child. A child was a nobody without any status.

To say that entering the kingdom is like becoming a child – its means becoming a nobody. Most of them had very clear ideas of what the kingdom of God was about. It was about pride, status. They argued who would get the best seats. They reflected on who the top dog nation would be. And they drew lines between the pure who were in and the impure who were out. That's us in them out.

But Jesus has a different idea of the kingdom. You have to put aside, pride status power to be in the kingdom of God. On one occasion the disciples were arguing who was to be the greatest in the kingdom. And Jesus said to them look the kings of the gentiles lord it over their subjects. "But not so with you: rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves". In the kingdom of God is about service to others not power and status. So here we've got something not sentimental but radical and challenging.

And then I can see another meaning which perhaps is in this as well. Though the way we bring up and value children may be very different now from then I guess one thing was the same. A child at the beginning of their life is open to a future that is not yet fixed. What it will be is not yet determined. The child has no established pattern of life, no past prejudices or preconceived ideas, all is open, all is new. Nothing is yet tired, stale or fixed.

As we grow older we begin to lose this capacity. Life begins to settle down in a mould, the prejudices begin to form. Gradually life settles in its ruts, and now if the question is asked what will we be in the future, the answer is an older version of what we are now. What's the future going to be like, they asked someone once, oh like the present only longer.

This is one of the fears I personally have about growing older. I became resigned years ago to losing my hair. My children tell me my faculties are going the same way. But how terrible if you get so there can never be anything new in your life. Here's someone who at 50 hasn't developed their thinking at all since they were 20. What a sad way to live. Here's someone

whose marriage has lost any kind of love or meaning – and they don't even try any more anymore to find anything new. Here's someone who ceased to look for God in their life – I'm not a Church goer they say as if that was written in stone. "I tell you unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven". Unless we are willing to change and grow inevitably we are stuck just where we are.

And now perhaps we can turn to the story of Nicodemus. He's the very opposite of child like. He's an important man. His life is settled and stuck. And Jesus says to him "I tell you no-one can see the kingdom of God without being born again". "What are you talking about" "Nicodemus stammers "Really Jesus I find all this God stuff fascinating but I'm not up for a personal overhaul or any kind of new birth". But being in the presence of God is about being open to change, to growth, to renewal.

Whether we've 22 or 102 we all of us need new birth not just once in a life but time and time again. When the wagon trains were rolling west across the American prairies great deep ruts were formed by the wheels. It's said at one place someone put up a notice "Beware of this rut. Once in it you'll be stuck in it for the next 22 miles". May none of our lives ever be like that.

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