

TJW, HT, 10.2.08, Mark 10.13-16

There is nothing in this morning's sermon that's hard to understand. There's nothing that will particularly tax your brain. Many parts of the Bible do stretch our brain-cells - but not the part we're looking at this morning.

Yet although what the Bible says is often straight-forward, its message is designed by God to get under our skin - using simple incidents, described in simple ways, it lays us bare before God.

The author G.K. Chesterton put it this way: "It's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that trouble me. It's the parts I do understand - they're the ones that trouble me."

That's so often the way that the power of God's Word in the Bible works: we read something in the Bible, we think about it, and then we start to realise that God is opening up something about ourselves - something we didn't really want to admit, something we liked to keep hidden.

And as this word from God does its work on us, it keeps troubling us, nagging away at us, when we don't accept it. And it's reassuring and life-giving when we do accept it.

So do you see that the right attitude to have when you come to hear the Bible preached is this: what is God going to say that should get under my skin and trouble me, and change me? - And what is he going to say that should reassure me, and strengthen me?

Now this morning we're beginning a short series of sermons from Mark's Gospel, running up to Easter. And I do recommend that you turn to the first passage, today's reading, Mark chapter 10.

Before I read it again, let's pray for the right attitude... [pray].

From verse 13. [READ verses 13-16].

I've talked about the Bible's message being a message that troubles us. And there is a message here that should do that. We'll see that in a moment.

But probably most people's first reaction to this incident is more like a sweet "aaaarrhhhhh" moment, than a troubling wince.

Here are the disciples arrogantly trying to keep children away from Jesus - and Jesus objects, and embraces the children, and blesses them, saying that they, too, can be in the Kingdom of God.

So, first, what you see here is that: **1. Jesus welcomes children.**

Jesus was constantly surrounded by crowds - sick people wanting to press through the crowd to touch him, in the hope of being healed - curious people wanting to get close enough to hear what he was saying, because his teaching was the most amazing thing they had ever heard.

It's not really surprising that his closest followers start behaving like his personal minders, wanting to protect him from all this.

And we've got to remember, too, that children had a quite different place in the world back then, than they do in ours.

Most of the time, we see little children quite romantically. We love the funny things they say. What they think about things is important to us. Most parents feel that all their free time revolves around their kids.

But in Jesus' day it was different. Of course parents were affectionate to their children - but socially children had no real status at all. They were to be seen, but not heard. No one would have been shocked that Jesus' disciples wanted the children to be at the back of the queue to meet Jesus.

In fact, it would probably have been shocking that their actions made Jesus as angry and indignant as they did.

But right through his time on earth, Jesus showed a particular love for people who were treated as unimportant by everyone else.

He was born to a teenage girl in a nowhere village in the back of beyond. He chose to spend time with fraudsters and prostitutes.

His treatment of children is part of the same package.

There are surely three lessons for us here.

First: our ministry to children matters.

What goes on in Junior Church Sunday by Sunday, as the leaders teach our children the Bible, is just as important as the sermons in here for adults. Why? because Jesus tells us how important the children are to him.

As a preacher I forget that too often. Junior Church is not a crèche which runs just so that we can have an adult sermon. It's children being brought to Christ, and to his teaching, so that they can trust him for themselves.

There's one particular way we want to strengthen our children's work. Right now we advertising for a younger person to join the ministry staff as an 'Apprentice', who will concentrate on children's work. £5000 was given to fund this at last year's Gift Day, and we need to pray for a really good person to come forward.

At Gift Day this year we're aiming to provide further money for this kind of addition to our ministry. The letter you'll take away today will tell you more about that.

And if our children's ministry matter, so therefore do our children's leaders matter.

There can be real joys in being a Junior Church leader - but often people find it tough going, and hard work.

Andy Winter does great work in supporting and training Junior Church leaders. But we do need to acknowledge them and support them more.

I want to take that on board as Vicar - so in coming weeks we'll be hearing more from Junior Church leaders in church services.

But we who are parents also need to do something about this. I've heard that a couple of Junior Church leaders couldn't remember any parents of children in their group ever thanking them for their work, or asking them how things were going. What were the children being taught? How could we as parents follow up at home what was taught on a Sunday? Is my child showing that they love Jesus, when I'm not there with them?

I'm sure some parents do thank their children's leaders - but our children's leaders matter, we need to let them know that they matter.

And also what parents teach their children matters.

There's one big danger in having Junior Church. It can lead parents to abdicate responsibility to children's leaders - whereas the Bible places the greatest responsibility on parents for teaching their own children about Jesus.

Jesus said that the Kingdom of God could belong to people like our children, so we need to teach them regularly about him.

For any parent, getting into routines and discipline, and sticking to it, is like nailing jelly to a wall: just as you're getting it fixed, something changes and it all slips through your fingers.

But for those parents who have got out of the habit of reading the Bible with your children most days, and praying with them, out of the habit of talking with them regularly about Jesus - you need to know that what you can teach them about Jesus matters.

If you need help with this, ask a family you know who are doing better at this than you right now to give you some tips. And then do it.

“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them,” says Jesus.

His first desire for your kids is not that they do well at school, and don’t cause you any grief. It’s that they enter his kingdom by making him their own king.

Jesus welcomes children. But do you see that Jesus is talking about far more than children here? “The kingdom of God belongs to such as these,” he says... - and verse 15... [READ].

‘Receiving the kingdom of God’ here means: coming into a proper relationship with God as your king - it means having all the benefits of that relationship now - and it means the assurance of heaven beyond death.

And, says Jesus, we must... **2. receive the kingdom of God like a little child.**

Let’s be clear what this does not mean.

It does not mean that you’ve got to throw your brain away and stop asking tough questions about the Christian faith.

The Bible has good answers to all the philosophical questions you can ask of it. Jesus doesn’t say be child-ish, he says: be child-like.

Nor is he saying that all children are naturally sweet and innocent and trusting.

Anyone who thinks that probably ought to go and see what really goes on the school playground.

So what is this about? Two things.

Remember what I said about children in Jesus' day? They had no real importance in the world - a lowly social position - no claim on any rights.

And think what all little children have in common. They are totally dependent. They can't do anything for themselves. Without an adult to care for them they won't live.

Lowliness and dependence. Those are the attitudes that Jesus says we need, if we're going to have any of the blessings of belonging to him.

You see, Jesus offers us a relationship with God as a gift.

He insists that we can't earn it and don't deserve it, that we don't have any rights just to walk up and claim it - but he offers it to us anyway.

So, to begin as a Christian, and to keep going as a Christian, we've got to admit our lowliness, our humbleness, before Jesus.

You've got to see what the Bible says about Jesus' perfection, his extraordinary love, his amazing sacrifice of himself - and you've got to acknowledge that we have no more chance of walking into his presence by right, just as we are, either now or when we die, than a snowman has of surviving a heatwave.

And so we've got to admit our complete dependence on him.

I doubt I need to convince you that you are not perfect. I don't need to convince you that we often prefer to keep God in the boot, rather than in the driving-seat of our lives. It's nice to know he's there, but we'd rather have him like a spare tyre - just for emergencies.

All of that seems so natural to us - and it's what the Bible simply labels sin.

And it means that we have no right to enter God's presence in heaven when we die.

We have no claim on a relationship with him now.

But the best news about God is that he doesn't ask us to deserve it, or to produce a document proving our right to it.

He simply offers us heaven as a free gift. He offers forgiveness freely, if only we will accept it.

If you're here this morning, and you're not a committed Christian, this is the most vital message for you to hear.

Heaven is not like Argos - you'll be glad to know. How does it work at Argos? You pay at the desk - they give you a ticket telling you to queue at point A, B or C, to collect what you've paid for.

I've met a couple of families this week who clearly think of heaven that way.

They seem to think that they're paying their entry fee to heaven right now by being decent people, and that when they die they'll queue at the door of heaven, present their 'decency' ticket at God's counter, and he'll let them in.

(In fact many regular church-goers think like this.)

You must know that having this approach to God is the very way to be sure of finding yourself excluded from heaven.

Heaven is not like Argos - which is a relief.

It's more like being given a Christmas present by someone you've treated badly.

They say to you: "Here's your present. Happy Christmas."

What's the only way to miss out on that present? It's if you're too proud to accept it - if you're so embarrassed about their amazing generosity that you get your wallet out and try and give them some money for it instead.

You can miss out on God, and miss out on heaven - and you will, if you're too proud to accept it because it's free and undeserved.

Do you see how Jesus' message to us here should both trouble us, because we've got to become lowly and dependent, and we don't like that - and it should also reassure us if we accept it - because he gives us freely what we could never earn anyway.

I urge you not to miss out on what Jesus offers.

And for those of us who are committed Christians this morning:

We've got to keep becoming again like little children, who know their lowliness and dependence.

What Christ has given you is a great gift. Do you treasure it? - do you build your life on it? - or does it sit on a shelf gathering dust, like a Christmas present you didn't really want?

That troubling question should get under our skin.

But if it's a gift you didn't earn, you can't lose it by failing to match up to it, can you.

The sermons over the next few weeks on Mark chapter 10 will have this theme in common - God's free grace.

Grace should take away so much of our fear, and bring reassurance.

God doesn't give you the gift freely - only then to keep you fearful by asking you to keep deserving it.

From the day you came to Christ, to the day you die, all we can do is become like a little child who accepts an underserved gift, and, with their words and their lives, says simply: 'thank you'.

The only way to miss out on a free gift is not put yourself in the right position to accept it.