

Address on 23rd August 2020 – Lessons from Mark’s gospel, week 9

Children in the Way The place of children in the Kingdom of God – Mark10:13-16

Introduction

100yrs ago when the colonial government was giving out parcels of land in Kenya – much of it to those who had fought in the WW1 – they gave out the land around Nairobi in 10acre plots. One of those who received a plot decided he should tithe his good fortune and he gave 1acre for the building of a church (a tithe being 10%). Over time this church was used heavily by the local schools and became known as The Children’s Church.

By the time I arrived in Kenya in the 1990s the church had become a family church, a place where all ages could meet on a Sunday morning, but it still had a focus on children and the pews were still children size. None of the adults seemed to mind sitting on pews that were slightly too small for them. It was just great to see a church on a Sunday morning buzzing with excitement and full of children from many different nationalities (Nairobi being a cosmopolitan city).

The official name of the church was Christ Church, Westlands, but we all called it The Children’s Church and the point about it was that it had children at the centre. It said children matter. It said that children are a part of God’s family. Sometimes in our services when we split into groups, we sent the adults out rather than the children. We also had an outreach ministry to street children in the area, initially giving them food but over time building classrooms and hiring teachers and a social worker so that we could provide education and welfare too.

Children in the Scriptures

There are surprisingly few references to children in the Bible.

One well known story is the call of Samuel. Samuel was just a small boy when he was taken to the temple and put into the care of the priest, Eli. One night, Samuel thinks Eli is calling him, but it turns out to be God. God spoke to Samuel and the boy went on to serve God as judge and prophet in Israel.

Another is the call of David. Samuel is instructed by God to go to Jesse and to anoint one of his sons to be future king over Israel, but which one? Six of Jesse’s sons were brought to meet Samuel, but God had not chosen any of them. Only when the boy David is brought in from looking after the sheep does God say, “this is the one.” Why? Because David was a man after God’s own heart.

In the new Testament, we have the story of Jesus in the Temple, aged about 12yrs but confounding the religious leaders of the day with his understanding and wisdom.

All these stories remind us that we should not overlook young people. Young people are important to God.

Possibly the best known passage of all involving children is the one we are looking at today. Jesus is tired. The disciples are trying to protect him, so when people bring their children to Jesus for his blessing, the disciples turn them away. On seeing this, Jesus rebukes them. “Let the children come to me” he says, “for the Kingdom of God is made of such as these.”

Holy communion

Some years ago in the Church of England there was a debate as to whether we should admit children to holy communion. Traditionally we say not until after confirmation around the age of 12yrs, but why? Why do we exclude children from ‘the family meal’? We wouldn’t stop them eating with us at home so why leave them out from this sacred coming together?

The Kenyan church was ahead of the Church of England in this regard. In Kenya we allowed children to come to communion, even babies if they had been baptised.

A bigger problem

We have a much bigger problem today, a much more serious problem. In many of our churches up and down the land there just aren't any children. The average age of many of our congregations is over 60. Sadly, for many years we've missed attracting families and children and we are now in a position where we talk about 'missing generations', people in their 20s and 30s, and even 40s and 50s, as well as children.

What can we do?

I am not saying I have the answers but surely we need to do something different from what we have been doing. As the saying goes, 'if we carry on doing what we've always done we'll get what we've always got', and it just isn't working. We need to think again. We need to make outreach our priority. We need to make children and young people our focus.

How old were you I wonder when you came to Christ? My guess is that most of you have been coming to church since you were youngsters and you became Christians as children. You can become a Christian at any age but as we get older we become more set in our ways and less likely to change. Children, on the other hand, haven't made up their minds. Let's at least tell them about Jesus so they can decide whether they are interested or not.

I don't have all the answers, but I know we have to think seriously about what we are going to do.

Over the past few years there have been many baptisms in the churches in our benefice but where are those children now? Why aren't they here in church? Is it because our worship style is not appropriate? Maybe we need to think again about our services to try to make them more attractive and accessible to families and children.

Our Messy church is great. This is one activity that is attracting children. We need to support this. It is one of the most important things we do.

Maybe we have to go even further and rather than trying to get people to come to church we have to take Jesus to them. Bishop's Green has been on my mind. When I go there I usually see children and young people playing or 'hanging out' together. Could we do something at Bishop's Green, maybe start something in the hall there? It is possible that another Christian group is already working there but if not, wouldn't it be exciting to plant a fresh expression of church, one that is vibrant and different and engages with the people there? It would be a lot of work, but we learnt last week that God doesn't call us to an easy life but to a committed one. He calls us sometimes to make sacrifices. How committed are we to building the church of the future? How prepared are we to put ourselves out that others may come to know Jesus? How ready are we to put our time and money into new ventures, to step out in faith, to take the good news to the younger generations and hopefully to see out churches growing again?

Conclusion

We will need to keep coming back to this as we plan the next few years and think about the wider Benefice of the Future. We have to do things differently. We must find a way of re-connecting people with the living God and of introducing children to the Jesus who said, "let the children come to me." We fail him if we are not giving them that opportunity.

Prayer

Lord, forgive us where we have failed and show us what we need to do today to give young people in our communities a chance to meet you and find that life which you promise. Amen

Anthony Smith