

Mark 10:13-16 How Jesus views our children

Introduction

What is your view of children? The health of a society or country can be judged by the way it treats its most vulnerable members, young children and the elderly. Britain does not fair well if we are honest in addressing the status of these categories of human beings. With reference to the elderly the pressures seem to grow year after year for some form of euthanasia with the examples of the Netherlands and the US state of Oregon cited as patterns to follow. Anyone who looks closely at these examples will see a disturbing pattern of the rationalisation of palliative care; with some people and their families in Oregon, for example, being pressured by medical staff not to take up various forms of treatment or care on financial grounds and encouraged to terminate lives instead. In the Netherlands each year there are at least a few hundred examples of suspicious deaths of older people as a result of the legalisation of euthanasia in that country. These are not good examples to follow as most medical staff in our country would accept. How well do we treat children? The appallingly high abortion statistics are a shame on our land with the lives of precious boys and girls being reduced to an adult's choice whether they live or die. The pressures from government and the sex industry for ever younger children to be taught more explicit sex education, rather than allowing children to be children is another example of moral decline in our land. Jesus proclaimed the words written in this passage in a social context where children were valued. However, outside of Jewish homes in the ancient world it was a very different story. The Christian writer and philosopher Justin wrote a book in the Second Century AD explaining why Christianity was superior as a belief system and as a way of life, compared to the other Religions found in the Roman world. One of the items he raised was the treatment of children. Christians value their children he said –all of them! In Roman society abortion was available on demand for the wealthy; for the poor the practice of exposure was common, that is newborn babies that were unwanted were left at a particular location in a town or city with other 'refuse' to die of cold or starvation. Many Christians are poor, said Justin, but we would never treat our children in that way. Other early Christian writers (Epistle to Diognetus late Second Century AD) also make similar claims. Naturally in the present context we are focussing particularly on the welcome God has for children and which we ought as His children to reflect in our own actions. Here, at this time, the words of Jesus are speaking to us. We have a responsibility to heed what Jesus tells us about the importance of children.

1. The Action of Parents (Mark 10:13a) *People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them*

Why should anyone want to take part in a service of infant dedication as we are doing today? Is there a reason for it, or is it merely a nice thing to do that people have got into the habit of doing down the centuries? I want to suggest that there are good reasons for what we are doing. First of all we must recall

(a) **The Source of Children** (Psalm 127:3) Psalm 127:3 reminds us that: *Children are a gift from the Lord, they are a real blessing* (Good News version). There are several thousand couples in the United Kingdom who would love to have their own children, but are unable to do so. Another significant proportion of couples require varying degrees of medical intervention to enable them to conceive and bring to birth their own child or children. This appears to be an increasing problem in our country. Therefore, we need to underline the privilege of parenthood. This is not a 'human right' despite the recent change of the law to allow lesbian couples to have fertility treatment on those grounds. Children are a sacred gift given to us in

trust from God. When we view parenthood in this way it enables us to recognise the seriousness of our responsibilities as parents. If God gives us the joy of parenthood we must also accept that one day we will give an account to Him for the fulfilment of our responsibilities. All of us who are parents in this gathering today can reflect on our own earlier promises, as we share with Francois and Pips in this celebration of the birth of Daniel John.

(b) **The Example of Jesus** (Luke 2:22) In Luke's Gospel chapter two we see that Joseph and Mary ²² *When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord),²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: a pair of doves or two young pigeons.²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required,²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: ²⁹Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace.³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation,³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all people,³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.³³The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him.* Mary and Joseph had already fulfilled the Jewish law by arranging for the baby Jesus to be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth (Luke 2:21). However, they also chose to go to their special place of worship for an Infant Presentation or Infant Dedication service –both terms mean the same thing. In effect this is a thanksgiving to God for the birth of the child. In that service the parents Mary and Joseph were acknowledging God's goodness to them through the gift of their child. In effect their expression of gratitude is also an acceptance of the responsibilities for that child. Not only to care for the child's physical needs, but also to bring Him up in the way that God would want them to do. It is very clear that this was not a ceremony of infant baptism. In that ceremony the parents are making promises for the child, rather than themselves, which they hope the child will later confirm in some form of confirmation service. In this church we are seeking to follow the pattern adopted by Mary and Joseph of giving thanks for the gift of –in this case Daniel John – and hoping and praying that he will later come to put his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and then follow His command of believers' baptism and the example of Jesus when He was baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. I want to ask each person present today: Have you put your faith in the Lord Jesus?

(c) **The Example in our day** (Mark 10:13a) *People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them.* These parents didn't say I won't decide for my child I will let them decide when they grow up! This sounds plausible in theory, but by not bringing a child /young person to church /Sunday School they are not in a position to make informed choices for themselves! Are you as a Christian parent doing all you can to model a Christian lifestyle in your priorities and values at home and elsewhere so that your children can see it being modelled, however imperfectly, in everyday living? It is very interesting that although the gospel writer Mark, following Jesus Himself, assumes that both parents were in favour of bringing the child to Jesus for a blessing, the assumption behind the last few words of verse 13 implies that it was the fathers whom the disciples rebuked for bothering Jesus (because the word them αὐτοῖς is masculine in form -Cranfield, *Gospel of Mark*, p.323]. What does this imply for us? Fathers as well as mothers are responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of their children. Too many fathers leave spiritual matters entirely to mothers with respect to the training and nurture in the Christian faith of the children in their families. God has placed responsibilities on both parents which is why both parents are making the same promises in

church at a service of infant dedication. We men must not opt out of our responsibilities for the spiritual upbringing of our sons and daughters. Are you /am I setting a good example within our respective families?

2. The Attitude of Jesus (Mark 10:13b-14, 16) ¹³*People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He 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. ¹⁶And he took the children in his arms put his hands on them and blessed them.*

How did Jesus respond to this interruption when parents brought children to Him for a blessing? Did He say –this isn't on the order of service –go away? Did He say I'm too tired or too busy to see you and pray for you today? No! He took the time to meet with them and bless them. The church of Jesus Christ today should give a similar welcome to the children in our midst. Jesus was not only willing to see the children –politeness. Jesus made it plain that He was delighted to acknowledge the presence of children in their midst. Culturally children were to be seen and not heard in that culture (as in our own until a few decades ago). Jesus held a very different opinion of children. He welcomed them, inviting them to speak to Him, as we should do also today. In Mark's Gospel the implication is given that children up to the end of primary age were welcome to receive a blessing. (Boys aged twelve years went through a special ceremony in Judaism during which they took on the responsibilities of adulthood.) Luke, in his account uses a word (Luke 18:15) which is normally reserved for babies. The implication from the gospel writers is that normally infant dedications are arranged for babies or young children, though it is still acceptable to dedicate children a few years older than the typical candidates for this ceremony. What did Jesus actually say here?

(a) **The Words of Jesus** (vs13b-14) *but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴When Jesus saw this, He was indignant. He 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' followers thought that He was too busy to bother with children. The common viewpoint of that day was that children were to be silent in the presence of adults, not least in the company of civic or religious leaders. So what His disciples did would not have appeared out of place to the crowd gathered on that occasion, but Jesus was different. He made plain that He was equally open to speak to women as well as men and with children as well as adults. The hierarchy of status in the secular world had no place in the kingdom of God where people were equal before God. How did Jesus react to His disciples' plans to stop children and babies being brought to Him? *He was indignant* (v14). The word implies a strong and deep displeasure at this course of action. Jesus wanted to make it very plain to His followers that children had a very important place in God's kingdom and could even model some kingdom values better than many adults. Their simplicity and straightforwardness, honesty and friendliness to others was something He welcomed. Many years ago there occurred an incident that demonstrated this point. The details of the story are vague, but the application of it is clear. A man apparently put a pile of gold coins outside his house with a sign next to it inviting people to take one of the coins. Many adults passed who read the sign, paused for a brief time, but chose not to take a coin possibly due to wondering what the 'catch' was. By contrast, children who read the notice took one without a second thought and went on their way assuming that the sign should be taken at face value. With respect to the promises of God our heavenly Father wants us to take them at 'face value'. Most if not all of us struggle at times to do that in the light of the complexity of modern life. What does this mean for us today? Jesus would suggest that our word should be our bond. When we make promises that we honour them and show our complete trustworthiness; that as our default position we trust one another as being people of similar integrity; that we want to

do what is best not merely for ourselves and our families, but also for other people in our workplace, our church family and sometimes further afield. Children naturally are generous people, willing to forgive others who fail and give them a fresh start. They usually have high expectation of others and a sense of appreciation for the natural world. Adults have huge responsibilities for how we influence the children under our care.

(b) **The Actions of Jesus** (v16) ¹⁶*And He took the children in His arms, put His hands on them and blessed them.* Jesus made time for children. It was not just a quick pat on the head as He passed by; instead He made some time to listen to them and to speak with them. Political commentators usually are quick to note that if we see a politician smiling at a baby or even holding one for a photograph that it must be time for an election. The only blessing for the baby, they might suggest, will be that by the time the next election comes round the child might be old enough for school and spared the attentions of the politician! Sincerity of our motivation in relating to other adults and children is a given in God's kingdom. Jesus was genuinely interested in other people, not least the children and there is no question that they appreciated it. We cannot solve many of the problems people face. We cannot take away the difficult experiences of life they are going through; what we can do may be simple acts of kindness and offering some small gifts of our time to show that we do care. Words are important, but our actions in modelling the Christian faith to our children are even more important. They can see what priorities we have in daily living.

3. The Attitude Required from us (Mark 10:15) ¹⁵*I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.*

These words of Jesus are very clear and a blunt challenge to us. Adults can make life more complicated than is strictly necessary. We rightly criticise the government for the multiplication of forms and paperwork that is the experience of so many of us on a daily basis. The sad reality is that the vast majority of it makes no difference at all; it is simply a whole variety of bodies 'covering their backs' in triplicate! However, God can make the same legitimate point with respect to many adults and their spiritual lives –or lack of one! The Bible, in very simple language that a child can understand, shows us how to put our faith and trust in God. Yet how many people want to relate to God in their own terms, rather than through the One whom God has sent to bring us into a relationship with Him. In John's Gospel chapter three Jesus met with one of the leading theologians of His day, a Pharisee called Nicodemus. This religious expert wanted an intellectual debate with Jesus and with all sincerity was looking forward to his discussions with Him. Yet Jesus viewed things differently. He accepted the greetings from His guest, but immediately put Nicodemus on the spot with some challenging words that are recorded in John 3:3: *Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."* If Jesus spoke those words to you today what would your response be? Could you say that there has been a time in your life when you have prayed a prayer of commitment to God when you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Saviour? If that has never been your experience can I ask you to consider taking that step today? What was Nicodemus' response? John 3:4 states: ⁴*"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"* Nicodemus has completely misunderstood what Jesus is saying here. So Jesus repeats His point with different words. ⁵*Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.* Natural birth (water) occurs whether we like it or not! Spiritual birth occurs when we respond to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit who has been at work in our hearts. In other words Jesus was asking Nicodemus –have you sensed the Holy Spirit speaking in your mind or conscience of your need to place your trust in Me or is this merely an intellectual exercise? What did Jesus want this man then, the crowds who

gathered with their children and us today to do? He was pointing to a commitment that He expects all of us to make in order for us to have a relationship with our heavenly Father. What does this involve?

(a) **Acknowledging God** Hebrews 11:6 declares: *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.* I once had a conversation with a young couple who were planning to get married. On the surface it appeared to be straightforward as neither had been married before and they seemed to be committed to one another. However, the problem arose when I made the straightforward statement that in order for the event to be credible it had to be understood that all participants believed in God under whose authority the ceremony would be taking place. The young lady was very willing to give ascent to that, but the man wished to start a philosophical debate. He wanted to define the nature and character of the God who would be acknowledged at the wedding ceremony. This was not a joke he was deadly serious. The Bible doesn't give us that luxury of the creatures defining their creator. Genesis 1:1 at the very beginning of the Bible states unequivocally: *In the beginning God...* We acknowledge Him and life gains its meaning and purpose through Him. This is a given, a reference point that gives direction to history. It also points to both the magnificence and the order of the natural world. This is the starting point on which we build our lives. Have you acknowledged God? Once we say 'yes' to this question, then we are confronted with the need to do what He says to us. The most important thing He asks us to do is to recognise His Son Jesus.

(b) **Believing in Jesus** Romans 10:9-10 states: *'That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.* Have you taken this step of child-like faith? What is hindering you from doing so today –if you are not already a committed follower of Jesus? a Christian is a person who has acknowledged that Jesus died in my place on the cross, that He bore the punishment I was due for my sins and through His acceptance by God I have been forgiven. Do you need to take this step today? It is not complicated if childlike –it is adults that complicate things!

(c) **Confessing our sins** I John 1:9 remind us of a wonderful promise from God. *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* Have you been forgiven? Jesus has done the hardest part we have the easier one. Yet human pride can prevent us from taking the decisive step:

(d) **Deciding to follow Jesus** (Mark 10:15) Jesus has made it clear that the gospel is simple enough for a child to understand and accept. If you have not done so already will you be willing to pray a prayer of commitment to follow Jesus and trust Him to guide and direct your life. As a Christian this morning, who has already taken this step of faith, are you continuing to exercise child-like trust in Him? These un-named people wanted to meet with Jesus and for their children to do the same. Despite opposition from His disciples they persevered and were rewarded for that faith. Have you entered God's kingdom by faith? May all of us go out this morning, by His grace, saying 'yes' I have put my faith and trust in God through Jesus my Saviour and Lord, Amen