

The Cathedral 10.30am Eucharist – 20 September 2009
Trinity 15: Mark 9:30-37

‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me’ Mark 9:37

There are only 95 days until Christmas! Maxwell, the Harrod’s Christmas bear has been available since June and two dreaded words were heard at the diary meeting last Monday morning, on my first proper workday here – carol service! I want you to imagine it’s a Sunday afternoon just before Christmas and I’m in a local Residential Elderly Care Home with some of the congregation and choir singing carols. Trees are twinkling and mince pies will shortly be forthcoming. The residents, many known to me are glad we’ve come but their attention isn’t really on the shepherds keeping watch, the choir of angels or the lowing cattle. Instead people are focussed on Lucy, a delightful 2 year old who has come with us to help. She is dancing and circling to the music in the middle of the room. This child so full of life and potential, energy and sheer freedom, unaffected affection and trusting tolerance is really why the residents are pleased. Lucy has stolen the show and no amount of David Wilcocks descants could ever compete.

Jesus prophetic actions now often bypass us. They become rather saturated in sentimentality or familiarity. When Mark tells us that Jesus places a child centre-stage, he re-orders the priorities of the universe. He does this in the aftermath of a very typical adult argument about rivalry and greatness. Like Lucy at Christmas, he shifts the focus elsewhere.

We know that children were fairly invisible within first century Jewish tradition. They only came into their own when they ceased to be children and became adults. So they were powerless, voiceless, vulnerable and extremely dependant. I wonder what sorts of words we would use to describe children in society at large and within the church. We’ll still hear first century overtones in those who think they should be seen and not heard, the glaring and shushing approach that is alive and well in many churches. Or we see the myths about the young being dangerous, lazy, and undisciplined which sells tabloid papers whilst the truth is they are most likely to be victims of crime rather than perpetrators.

We’ll recognise too children’s vulnerability and dependency. But overall we’re rather confused as to what children and childhood now means – so this doesn’t help us when we’re trying to decipher Jesus’ actions.

My observation is that we oscillate between a zealous over protectionism or a foreshortening of childhood. So few children dare play outside. Adults outside immediate family are less in touch with kids. On the other hand there doesn’t seem to be much freedom to be children as they are pushed to be grown up far too quickly whether that’s the pressure put upon them by testing and tutoring or our commercial world preying on their pester power. We’ve seen the debate oscillate between these poles in the news this week as we reflect on the new safeguarding body addressing child protection issues. How can we balance vulnerability and freedom?

Certainly in my former parish in southwest London, I could see with my own eyes from time to time the truth of what the major Children’s Society Report on Childhood in this country has revealed – not all is well with childhood. Many children still grow up here in poverty with responsibilities way beyond those appropriate to their years. Whilst others experience problems created by what has been dubbed as ‘afluenzia’. The real needs of children are not really met by ipods, Abercrombie & Fitch or Facebook. Rowan Williams has said that our problem is ‘that children need to be free of the pressure to make adult choices if they are ever to learn how to make adult choices’ (Lost Icons, 2000, p27). Somehow we have to let them be children and as adults we need to receive that gift.

All this describes some of the filters through which we hear this story. Here in the second half of Mark's gospel, attention falls on the cross. Despite Jesus foretelling his death and resurrection, the disciples are confused and indeed unwilling to receive it. We read that they did not understand and they were afraid (verse 32). When you mix fear and ignorance with a good old dose of rivalry – this time male but we don't have a monopoly on that, you end up with potent dysfunction. The kind of dysfunction which becomes exposed in the cross – the yes's which mean no's, the power play masked by expedience, the banter which avoids truth telling. Jesus is enacting a new way.

The direction of travel in the gospel is towards Jerusalem and the public centre of power but here he returns to where he spent much time, Capernaum, to a familiar house to where he knows the centre of power is for most people – the real place where values and behaviours are nurtured – the home! He creates a circle – we're told he places a child in the centre – a circle may seem inclusive but when a victim is bullied or stoned, they are encircled as he will be later in the Garden of Gethsemane. Those who circle such a one conspire together and rely on the envy or rivalry going on to keep them on the edge of power and the victim powerless in the middle.

Jesus brings the child into this and reveals their rivalries, shows it up for all to see – what do their arguments about greatness now really look like? The child is being straightforwardly a child, thoroughly themselves, not a prop but like Lucy, a captivating and enlivening presence free from the expectations of adulthood. Normally those engaged in such rivalry would never dare break out of that cycle to embrace the powerless one but here in the arms of Jesus is the child. By receiving this little one, we encounter a life beyond the demands of Dawkins biology, beyond competition and the instincts of survival or triumph. We glimpse that it might be possible to live rather more fully, to love wastefully, to embrace the little and the lost around us and to embrace the little and the lost within ourselves. We need not victimise others or make victims of ourselves.

All is new for me and so I'm yet to really understand just how this discourse is expressed here but I could make a guess about the rivalries that might be conceivable between clergy and lay people, between cathedral and diocese, between old cathedral and new cathedral, between city and county, between different faiths. We are now engaged in Cathedral Square and big change is afoot. When change is combined with physical territory, especially when that territory is imbued with spiritual meaning – chairs, screens, holy fonts and tables, not too mention churchyards and memorials– at such a time as this rivalry rears. Don't panic when it does, it means we are really engaging with this change and we shouldn't worry about it too much. But remember too, the child that Christ sets in our midst questioning such rivalry and beckoning us to a more grown up and redeemed way of living. This uncertainty must not be the moment to create more victims, knock about people or violate them in any way. Rather such change is an enormous challenge to live a more fully human life here where the outcast around us and the outcast within us is welcomed. The word actually translated as welcome is the verb to receive. We tend to be quite good at giving of ourselves in the modern day church – yes there is always more to do – but here the knack to breaking the cycles of rivalry is not to do more, to serve more, to try harder instead it is to receive more, to have feet washed, and empty hands filled by the little.

The Kentucky poet farmer Wendell Berry describes the gift of such a one as this child that Jesus elevates. Wendell Berry writes:

*'I dream of a quiet man
Who explains nothing and defends
Nothing, but only knows
Where the rarest wildflowers
Are blooming, and who goes,
And finds that he is smiling
Not by his own will'
(Given Poems, Wendell Berry, 2005, p70)*

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