**Mark 10:13-16**

**A childlike faith**

It is lovely to have our friends from Berlin with us this morning, reminding us by their presence that the Christian family is not limited by geography or denomination but that we are all brothers and sisters together in Christ; all children together of our Heavenly Father.

And it’s lovely to celebrate with Ruth and Gavin today the renewal of their wedding vows, reminding us that when one couple are celebrating, we will celebrate with them as is right and proper for a Christian family; we are all brothers and sisters together in Christ; all children together of our Heavenly Father.

It is important for us to be reminded of the importance of children in the Christian faith: that we are all God’s children but also the importance of young people in the church and in the eyes of God. And that’s what I want to think about for a bit now as we reflect on this very important story from the Gospel of Mark that we have just heard read to us.

We are joining Jesus and the disciples as a real crunch point in the Gospel narrative. When this event happens, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he knows that he is facing crucifixion. But the importance of receiving children is such that, even in this period of emotional agony, he finds time for them.

Now, this story is a well-known one and it is a lovely image of Jesus, isn’t it? We have seen the Sunday School images and the paintings of Jesus with a beatific smile on his face with little children sitting on his knee and standing around him. It’s one of those Biblical stories that is up there with the Nativity as an example of such a ‘nice’ story that we rarely get beneath the skin of what is happening here. So let’s have a look at it in a bit more detail to see what we can learn about God through it…

Firstly, we read in verse 13 that, “People were bringing children to him…” Perhaps the image you have in your mind is of a group of mothers taking their toddlers on a day out to see this famous man called Jesus; an exciting activity to do during half-term or something like that. But from the way the passage is written in the Greek, the truth is actually very different

What we learn from the way this sentence is phrased is that, actually, it was fathers who were bringing the children, not mothers.

Now why is this important? It’s because in the culture of the day, fathers had the responsibility of taking their children to a Rabbi to be blessed and dedicated to God. And that’s what’s happening here. The word ‘bringing’ is not the usual one used but is, in fact, the word used to bring a sacrifice to God as a way of dedicating oneself or that sacrifice to God.

So this was an intensely spiritual activity that was going on here. It wasn’t parents taking their kids on a day out to have some fun with this famous man called Jesus in the same way that we might take our young children to see Santa Claus at Christmas. It was parents bringing their children to Jesus so that they could be blessed and dedicated to a life of discipleship.

And that is at the heart of what we want for our children at St. Andrew’s, isn’t it? Of course, we want them to enjoy coming and for them to make friends here and have fun, but ultimately, we are wanting our children to be blessed by God and dedicated to him so that they grow to be strong disciples. That is the command of God given to us in Deuteronomy 6:7, which says this: “You shall teach my laws diligently to your children and shall talk of my laws when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up”. It is our spiritual responsibility to nurture our children in the Christian faith at home with them, by bringing them regularly to church and, for those of us who don’t have children ourselves, we still have a responsibility within the family of St. Andrew’s to do what we can to encourage the nurturing of children in the faith.

But as we return to our Gospel reading, we see that not everyone was happy with the children coming to Jesus. And, amazingly, the people who most resented it the most were the disciples of Jesus - those who had spent the longest time with him – and who, quite frankly, should have known better.

But here were these long time followers of Jesus openly rebuking the parents in a way that would have been both public and embarrassing.

Why did they do this? Who knows…Perhaps they were trying to protect Jesus’ time and space. Perhaps they didn’t like the chaos of having so many children around. Perhaps they resented having to share their space with children and wanted to keep Jesus all to themselves in a nice, tidy, quiet way.

Whatever their motivation, these long time followers of Jesus should have known better…

They had already forgotten something Jesus said just a few days previously, recorded in Mark 9: Jesus had taken a child into his arms and said this: “Whoever receives one child like in my name receives me.” And yet here they are, a few days later, rebuking the parents and trying to get rid of the children.

That did not reflect the heart of Jesus in that situation. In verse 14, we read of Jesus’ response: “When Jesus saw this, he was indignant…”

That’s a pretty strong word to use, isn’t it? Indignant. Jesus was really angry with the disciples here because their actions did not represent his value system.

And we must be absolutely sure that when we fail to encourage children in the faith, and when we spurn them, then Jesus is indignant with us too because our actions as a church do not represent his value system.

That is not saying that children should be allowed to run riot at St. Andrew’s or that everything we do should be organized around children. Of course, children and parents need to respect others in the same way they seek respect for themselves and their children. But what Jesus is saying here is that the *discipleship of children and young people* is the very heartbeat of his ministry and therefore the very heartbeat of the mission of his church.

And to express the importance of discipling children and young people, Jesus gives two quick commands in verse 14: “Let the children come to me” and “Do not stop them”.

If we want to reflect the heart of Jesus in our church, we must constantly be striving to find new and creative ways to encourage the children to come to him and we must be constantly striving to dismantle the barriers that prevent them from finding Jesus for themselves. There is an African Proverb that you may know well: “It takes a village to raise a child”. In the same way, each member of our church family shares in the responsibility of nurturing our children through prayer, example and the building of relationships.

But there is a flip side to this coin too.

Jesus is teaching us here not just what we can give to our children but also what we can receive from them too. Children and adults do not have just a one way relationship: it is not just that adults are the teachers and children the learners but in the Kingdom of God, children are also the teachers and adults are also the learners.

This is a profound spiritual truth that demands much humility on the part of adults: in the Kingdom of God, we must be as willing to learn from our children as we are willing to teach them. We adults must be as willing to be nurtured in faith by children as we are willing to nurture them in faith.

And that is not in some patronizing, shallow way. It means absolutely opening ourselves up to the children and young people and deeply listening to them about their experience of God and faith and giving them the space to teach us truths that we would otherwise never be able to grasp.

Jesus is absolutely clear on this in verse 15, where he says this: “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it”.

I must be as a little child in my faith to enter the Kingdom of God, so how can I know what that will look like in my own life if I don’t take the time to listen to the children and learn from them about matters of faith and about God?

Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that our faith should be childish in the sense of immaturity but that we are to be childlike in our faith.

What does that mean? What does a childlike faith look like?

Before answering that question, let me say two things that I don’t believe are necessarily childlike qualities in faith, although some people have said they are.

The first is humility. Some say that humility is a childlike quality in faith - but I’m sure that you have met many children who are far from humble! I would argue that, in fact, children are far from humble on the whole! They are very demanding, they think the world revolves around them, they interrupt conversations, they want our attention all the time. Now that’s to be expected – because they are children and they need to learn social rules. But it doesn’t lend itself to humility.

Secondly, some people say that simple faith is a childlike quality - but I’m not sure about that either. I think that, in their innocence, children can be naturally gullible. But that’s not the same thing as having simple faith and it’s not really a good model for following Jesus!

No, I think Jesus has two other things in mind here when he is talking about childlike qualities in faith.

The first is helplessness.

At the heart of our Christian faith is the realization that we are utterly helpless before God. We do not have the strength of character to always do what is right. We do not have the spiritual strength to live disciplined and holy lives. We do not have the emotional maturity to always respond in love and with compassion.

We are utterly helpless when it comes to living out the Christian life: we simply cannot do it in our own strength. Just as a baby is utterly helpless without a carer to provide for its every need, so we are helpless before God. And true faith begins when we recognize our helplessness and are content to rest in that and stop struggling in our own strength.

The second childlike quality is dependence

If we are helpless, then we must be dependent on God. The Lord is our Provider and we are dependent on his provision, in this life and in the next.

No-one can enter the Kingdom of God in their own strength.

No-one can enter the Kingdom of God through an attitude of independence.

To enter the Kingdom of God, we must be childlike in acknowledging our helplessness and our dependence. As we do that, so we shall become inheritors of the Kingdom of God and know what it is to have life in all its fullness. Having that mindset is a beautiful place to be, a beautiful way to live because we are finally released from social pressures to succeed and we have nothing to prove to anyone anymore – total psychological freedom!

With that mindset, we know who we are, because our identity is wrapped up in Christ and our whole sense of well-being is founded on that relationship. Paul, who wrote so much of the New Testament, is a perfect of this as he wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:10: “I am content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, all for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong”.

That is a beautiful state of mind to aim for, isn’t it?

And once we move into that state of being, the action of Jesus towards the children in this passage becomes our own experience, verse 16: “And Jesus took them in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them”

What a beautiful promise for each one of us: the blessing of Jesus on our lives when we rest in our helplessness and our utter dependence on him.

So, in conclusion then, children and a deep and profound blessing in our lives and in the family of this church here at St. Andrew’s. We have a deep responsibility to nurture them in the faith: we are the village chosen by God to raise the child, and by our prayers and our example and by forming relationships with our young people we can fulfill that responsibility.

But we must also have the humility to be taught by our children; taught what it means to be truly helpless, taught what it means to be truly dependent.

And as we rest in that childlike quality of faith, the riches of the Kingdom of God will be ours. Let us pray for a childlike faith. Let us become more helpless, more dependent on God and see what blessings Jesus will pour out upon us as a church family.