

Sermon
20 September 2015
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Mark 9:30-37

(Baptism)

Inappropriate. I think that's a good word to describe the disciples' behaviour in the text we read this morning.

Jesus has just told them that he was going to be betrayed and killed in the near future. But instead of trying to digest what he just said, instead of supporting him, they argue about who is the greatest. Insensitive, to say the least.

To bring it a little closer to home: It would be like attending a funeral, and instead of using the time to say goodbye or support the family, you compare your outfit with that of the other people there to see who's the best dressed person at the funeral.

Inappropriate! We just don't do that.

But do you know what's even worse than trying to figure out who looks the best at the funeral? Being caught out doing that!

Have you ever said something about somebody, and then realized – too late – that they heard you?! That’s very embarrassing!

Jesus didn’t overhear his disciples’ conversation, but he didn’t need to. He knew exactly what they were talking about. He could see it in their eyes.

And they could probably see the disappointment and hurt in *his* eyes.

But he doesn’t tell them off,
he doesn’t try to make them feel guilty for being so insensitive,
he doesn’t storm out the room and never talks to them again (like we probably would have done).
He just sits down, and replaces the disappointment in his heart with compassion.

And then very calmly Jesus explains to them that they’ve got it all wrong. The most important person in that house was actually not one of them at all, it was a child.

I’m sure that none of you find that a strange statement – that a child is very important to Jesus, because we all know that God loves children, and although we don’t always want to admit it, we all know that we can learn a lot from children too.

They are innocent and honest and trusting and loving to an extent that we can’t always understand.

Talking about the innocence and honesty of a child... Before we carry on, I would just like to share a story with you that André's (my husband) dad told me about André when he was a wee boy:

André's dad was a policeman. One day he came home early from work, but asked André's babysitter to please stay, because he wanted to go and take a nap. And then he said: "And if anybody asks, I'm not here!" As things go, 20 minutes later the doorbell went. And who was standing at the door? André's dad's boss!! When he asked for André's dad, the babysitter said that he wasn't in... But then, like a flash of lightning, André came running around the corner and said: "Why are you lying? My daddy taught me to never tell a lie. My daddy is home, in fact, he is lying in his bed!"

Although André's dad could tell me that story with a twinkle in his eye, I'm sure he didn't find it very amusing at the time! Children aren't only honest and innocent, they can be very cute too...

We might think that this honesty and innocence, or the trust and unconditional love we find in children are the reasons why Jesus says that we should be like children. And the picture in our head is probably one of Jesus serenely talking to his disciples with children quietly playing around his feet...

But that's not what it was like in those days and that's not what Jesus refers to when he says that we should be like children.

Things worked completely different in Biblical times, and we should be very careful not to project our own worldview on the stories in the Bible if we want to understand them correctly.

In the society Jesus lived in, honour and status were very important. And not in the same way that honour and status are important today. If you have status in society today, that means that lots of people will know you, or know about you, and that probably will make you feel good about yourself. But that's about *it*.

But in Biblical times your status in society literally determined what kind of lifestyle you could lead. Different classes of people were not allowed to mix with each other, and who you were in society determined what you were allowed to do: where you were allowed to live and work: who you were allowed to talk to: who you were allowed to marry: even what you were allowed to eat.

In this very strict social hierarchy of people, children were at the very bottom of the social ladder.

In actual fact, childhood in antiquity was a time of terror. Infant mortality rates sometimes reached 30%. Another 30% of children who survived at birth died by age 6, and 60% of children died by age 16. They suffered from famine, war, disease and dislocation. Children were very fragile, and survival to adulthood was a cause for celebration.

Children thus had very little status within the community or family.

A minor child was on par with a slave, and only after reaching maturity he/she became a free person who could inherit the family estate. The term “child” could actually be used as a serious insult.

This doesn't mean that children weren't loved and valued in those days, they were just not regarded as important on the social ladder.

They had to know their place, keep their distance, and never bother adults.

Today we feel completely different about children. We value their opinion, we try to include them in everything, we respect them, we allow them to make their own decisions (to a certain extent!), we see them as *persons*. Legally they even have rights in society, and they learn all about this at school.

So basically the situation today is the complete opposite of the situation in the time of Jesus.

By telling an adult that he/she needs to be like a child, was a huge insult. How could you expect somebody who lived in a society where status determined your bread and butter, to strive to be the least important person of all? Somebody with no rights and responsibilities?

This must have been a huge shock to the disciples. They all wanted to be important, to have freedom and easy lives – and they thought that they had all the right boxes ticked because they were friends with Jesus, the most important person alive. But Jesus burst their bubble.

He said that according to the rules of the society it might be of the utmost importance to have status, but that doesn't matter to God at all. Everybody is equal in God's eyes.

That would have been really hard for them to understand, because nobody was equal in those days.

But Jesus said that if you welcomed a child, that would mean that you welcomed him. And if you welcomed him, that would mean that you welcomed God.

So do the math, and decide what is more important to you.

Having a good and easy life, or having God in your life?

Because if you choose God, the things that are important to people in this world, will become irrelevant to you.

And although we see children in a different light from the people in antiquity, the message of this passage still applies to us today exactly the same - Because we like living easy and comfortable lives.

But being a follower of Jesus is not always easy and comfortable.

It can challenge us; it urges us to take a stand about things.

And children can actually help us to do that. Because they don't take things for granted, they will continue to love us no matter what we do. They forgive others in seconds. They don't hold grudges.

A child thinks that his/her mum is the prettiest woman in the world – no matter what she looks like, and that his/her dad is the strongest and coolest person in the world – no matter what the rest of society thinks.

And children don't question the existence of God. They don't try to understand everything in the same way we do. They just accept that

God is there, taking care of them and loving them, although they can't see him.

We can learn a lot from children.

Take a look at the refugee crisis for instance. Everybody was aware that this was going on, but because it's not on our doorstep, not many people tried to do something about it. But about a couple of weeks ago a photo on social media of a dead child who washed ashore, put people into action all of a sudden.

Why?

Because there were no political strings attached to that child. He wasn't just a migrant, he wasn't just a refugee. He was an innocent child, who didn't deserve to die in such a horrific way.

Unknowingly, children teach us what life is really about. So let's listen. Let's forget what the rest of the world wants us to do, and do what God wants us to do.

(....., if you take this to heart, you'll always be good parents, no matter what. Because if you put God in charge of your lives and of your family, things will always work out the way it should.)

No one person is more important in the eyes of God than the next – God loves all of us equally, we're all his family. So let's take care of each other like a family should.

Because Jesus said: “Whoever welcomes one of these little children (or unimportant people, or outcasts) in my name, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”
Amen