

*Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.* Mark 10:14-15

It was, I think, late 1972. The setting was a pretty little West London village called Hanwell, and specifically St Mary's Parish church, a neat Gilbert Scott pile whose elegant spire is easily visible from the railway viaduct as one approaches Hanwell station on the Oxford – Paddington line. This particular church service was special, because the parish was saying farewell to its curate, and the Rector was at the foot of the chancel steps, making a little speech about him. In the congregation was a two year old and, as was his wont, this toddler decided to go for a little walk out of the pew. Those who sat around were quite used to him coming along to say hello, and no-one took much notice until it was clear that he had decided to say hello to one person in particular, the parish priest. Up the aisle he strode – if two year olds can stride – out of the reach of his parents and up to the rector, whose long white surplice was perfect for a two year old to tug. And tug he did.

It was, you might say, an early sign of things to come. The rector looked down, and, taking the child's hand simply said "Hello Peter", and carried on talking. I stood there quietly and happily enjoying my new vantage point, and the service continued.

One obvious reason for my wanting to go to the front was the fact that I couldn't see what was going on. It's understandable but unfortunate that lots of people in lots of churches think that the place for small children is only at the back. There are plenty of advantages of being away from the action, of course, in particular that one can come and go, but I would hate to think that in any church of mine children were relegated to the back for fear that they might make a noise. A church without the sound of children is a far less healthy church than its opposite. Of course, being a town centre church, with very few families resident in the parish, we have only a few children among our congregation compared with other parish churches, but in many ways, we are an ideal church for them. The building is wide, not long and thin, and so the chancel and sanctuary are visible from all sides of the church. And we have a lot going on for people hungry for new experiences – sound and colour and smells and movement and even the odd splash of water.

It's because we have so much to learn from young children that Jesus held them up so often as an example to his disciples. A disciple, as we know, is one who learns, and among the wide age range of human beings, no group learns so quickly or so effectively as that group we call children. Remember that Jesus does not say that the kingdom of heaven belongs to children. What he says is, the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are like children. Openness, simplicity, enthusiasm and trust

– these child like virtues are to be striven after by each one of us, and they are reflected by many of the adults who feature in Jesus teaching – the man who finds treasure in the field and – in his joy – goes off and sells all he has to possess it; the passionate father who runs out into the road to greet his returning younger son; the faith-filled centurion who asks Jesus only to speak the word, and his servant will be healed.

One of the problems we have created for ourselves in modern times is the notion that the Christian faith is something which we understand, rather as we understand trigonometry or the causes of the French Revolution. Such a view encourages the notion that I am a better Christian than my two year old godson. But that is very far from the truth. Childlike trust is precious beyond words not just because it is the basis of uncomplicated faith, but also because it underlies a willingness and a desire to love. To say a child cannot have faith is as ridiculous to say that a child cannot love – what, after all, is scriptural image of childhood and God our Father trying to say?

For us a church, children's issues have come relatively late. Churches in residential parishes have long learned lessons which for us are still to come. On Tuesday the Church Council will discuss the diocese's encouragement to welcome children to communion before confirmation. We shall also, probably in the new year, be starting our own children's

church, in collaboration with St Michael's, whereby those who wish to can spend the first half of the service elsewhere, mirroring what is going on in here – prayer and worship, scripture, teaching and music. As we move forward on such subjects, we do well not to make a sentimental idyll out of childhood – to patronise a child is as dismissive as to ignore a child. The childlike simplicity which Jesus exhorts in all of us entails something which we are reluctant to embrace, and that something is vulnerability. Our own generation is horribly aware of the consequences of denying genuine childhood to our children, trying to force them into experiences which do not belong with their stage of life, and forcing them because their physical as well as their chronological youth allows us to impose upon them.

But this vulnerability, with all its dangers, is as precious as any other aspect of childhood, and hence, according to Jesus, it is precious for those who would seek to belong to the kingdom. A childlike faith is not in any way blind – who is more inquisitive than a child? The mind of a child is a mind which is constantly taking on board new information, new experiences, and adapting to them in physical growth and in emotional and intellectual development. That model – learning quickly, adapting quickly, remaining the same person but developing continuously – is a model Christians should take as their own.

At the heart of such learning there remains a need for stability – trust in parents, homelife, whatever it is – and that trust is the real goal of Christian faith. To be uncomplicated in one’s relationship to God is not to be unthinking, not to be unchallenged, but it is to be one who is prepared to let God be God. It is adulthood which brings the arrogance of self-reliance, the apologetic embarrassment at not being able to run our lives perfectly, the intellectual disaster of trying to control everything and everyone around us with our minds. Putting Christ before our eyes in everything we do does not restrict, but frees us to question and demand as much as we possibly can, knowing that we do so in the safety and security of the relationship of love which makes us what we are. Knowing our need of God and of others is the most important knowing we can do. If we try to be childlike – if we trust, if we challenge, if we learn – we might just rediscover what it is to love.