

Attitudes to the child

Mark 9:33-37

I want us to think a bit further about the incident we hear in today's Gospel where the disciples are arguing about who is greatest, and in replying to them, Jesus takes a child as an example for them. That in itself is quite a startling act. Maybe it would help to take a quick look at how the contemporary world thought of children. The Jewish background was that the child was there to be educated about God. Until about the 1st century B.C. there were no such things as schools, and all learning happened in the home. And basically what they learned was the discipline of being God's people - what it meant to be people of the covenant. It was a very God-centred activity. The same principle applied to the schools which emerged just before the time of Christ. They were known as Beth-Sepher - "the house of the Book". They learned to read there - not storybooks, or the newspapers, neither of which existed - but the Law - the Torah, and the other holy books: what we now call the Old Testament. There is an early reference in the Talmud which suggests that their first reading book was Leviticus - a far cry from Janet and John! For the non-Jewish world of the 1st century, education was of course man-centred, not God-centred. But it was concerned with similar things - helping children as they grew up to conform to the ideals of the society in which they lived, and to accept the commonly held ideas and principles in their own lives. That varied of course, according to what those ideals and principles were. The Spartan child was brought up to be a fearless warrior, the Athenian child to be a philosopher. But what both Jewish and non-Jewish attitudes had in common was that the child was in some real sense "raw material" which had to be shaped and formed into a civilised adult. They were blank pages, to be written on.

And in that context, Jesus takes a child, and says - here is what you are aiming at. This is the ideal which you should aspire to. That must have been quite shocking and bewildering to them. That is particularly true in the way St Matthew tells the story of this incident, with the saying about "unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Remember the context in which Mark tells the story. They are asking about who is greatest. Jesus reply is that caring about children is the answer to that. Instead of worrying about their own status, they should be aware of the needs of the most vulnerable and weak members of their community. They have all their priorities wrong. Maybe there is something in that element of the story that we need to recapture today. We seem to live in a status-conscious world in one way and another. And whilst nations argue about their status, or groups within nations argue about relative importance (exemplified perhaps by the amount different groups earn), the weakest and most vulnerable members of the world community, or within the nation, are left wondering what all the argument is about. What does it matter who earns most, or who exports most, if within the nation there are the poor and the helpless, the victims of neglect, because we think other things, including ourselves, are of more consequence. To the people of Jesus' day - this human being Jesus put his arms around was "only a child" - someone who didn't really count. We have to hear his words when we start talking about individuals, groups or nations as being "only" whatever they are.

But Jesus goes much much further in startling them and challenging them, because he goes on to say "Whoever welcomes in my name one of these children, welcomes me". Christ is placing himself, and indeed his Father, firmly in this child. Now there is a tradition common to many religions, that the saint, the holy

man, the special person within the religious community has to be treated with great deference. Somehow this person must be nearer to God than the rest of us ordinary people, and so in treating him well, or providing for his needs, in some way we will provide for his God, and be able to share in that holiness in some mysterious way. Jesus says that is true of this very ordinary little boy. This child, not yet old enough to be an active member of a synagogue - a non-person in the religious life of his community - this nonetheless is the person in whom God, and God's Messiah is to be found. It is of a piece with so many other things Jesus said - about when we give the cup of water in his name, or when we cared for the have-nots, and in doing so cared for him. This must lie at the heart of all our dealings with children and faith. Where do we begin? There are those who see children as raw material for conversion, for indoctrination, for steering through the religious hoops which their system demands. At the extreme, there are even those who see them as consigned to hell if they are not given the right religious rituals or made to accept the right religious doctrines. And well away from the extremes, we still find those who, for instance, worry about children coming to Communion, because they don't understand it properly. How can such attitudes be tied in with Jesus' own attitude here, and his statement that in these children, we will find him. They are given a dignity and status which is incomparable. They teach us, not us them.

In what senses do we have to learn from them? Obviously, there is the simplicity of children - openness and honesty which is rarely matched in the adult world. We need simplicity of faith. Then there is the sense of dependence. Children have no shame about being dependent - why should they? It is natural. And part of what we have to learn to acknowledge is our utter dependency on God. We are in need of his protection, his provision, and without him, we would indeed be hopeless. And allied to that is the humility which we pray for in today's collect. The child when he needs help simply asks for it - every parent knows just how often that happens. The child comes with empty hands to receive what is given. And that is how we are to approach God. The child is essentially trusting and loving. In all the current distress about child abuse, what shines through is the love and trust which children sometimes *misplace*, but is essentially part of their nature. And it takes a great deal of abuse for it to be destroyed. Battered children go on loving their battering parents, quite irrationally, it may seem, but that doesn't make that love any less real. And God asks of us, that whatever our age we love and trust him.

I cannot leave these verses without widening their meaning a little. The basic teaching about children is vitally important. But we know that from very early days, Christians interpreted these and the similar sayings of Jesus to apply not only to children, but to other "little ones" - the newly converted members of the Christian group, the weak in faith and so on. This is particularly evident in Matthew and Luke's use of these sayings. It may indeed be a description of *all* believers, since we are being adopted as Sons of God by his grace.

So to sum up: status means nothing. Our status before God is that of a child. Therefore we can learn much from children, and we can assess ourselves very usefully by our own attitude to them, or to any group who are despised, thought of as second class, or not to be considered seriously. Jesus says that he himself is to be found in them. If we ignore them, we ignore him. But in welcoming them, we welcome him. There can be no higher status therefore than that of the child, and we forget that at our peril.