

“Gospel Kids”

Mark 9:33-37; Mark 10: 13-16

- *“The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. ... They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, ... and tyrannize their teachers.”*

Socrates (469 BC - 399 BC) nearly two and a half thousand years ago.

How often do we hear people speak about children like this in every generation? And isn't it true?! Kids have tantrums, they break windows, spill things on the carpet, break computers, lose mobile phones, vomit in your car, speak rudely to you and only think about themselves.

Yet Jesus goes to so much trouble to say that we must **welcome** children (9:37). Why does he say this? And what does it **mean** to **welcome** children? Well it has to do with the way we treat them.

So let's think about how we treat children in Australia.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, out of about 22 million people in Australia, there are over 4 million children (< 14 years).

- Last year there were 317,000 reports of child abuse. 21,000 were emotionally abused, 16,000 were neglected, 12,500 were physically abused, and 5,500 children were sexually abused. In Australia, it's estimated that a total of 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 7 boys have been sexually abused in their life.
- In 2007, there were 25,000 homeless children. 16,000 of them were turned away because there weren't enough resources to help them.
Over 90,000 Australian children are killed every year... by abortion. 23% of all pregnancies end in abortion, which makes abortion one of the most common surgical procedures in our country.
Wider than Australia – every day across the world, 27,000 children die of starvation. Every day. That's the equivalent of 75 fully loaded Boeing 747s crashing every day.
- ³⁵*Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."* ³⁶*He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them,* ³⁷*"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."*

In this passage, Jesus has just caught the disciples actually having an argument about who is the greatest among them. Jesus calls over a child, embraces him and says to the disciples: “You want to be great? You want to be **great**? Welcome this child.”

You can guarantee that the disciples weren't thinking of children when they were talking about how great they were. You see, in the culture of Jesus' day, children were considered to be among the least. They held a low place in society. And we even see the disciples in the second reading (10:13) stopping people bringing children to Jesus because they didn't want Jesus to be bothered by them. I don't think that's very different to today's world. Many people simply ignore children or consider them a nuisance. But Jesus says to the disciples:

True greatness doesn't come by doing a miraculous healing, or preaching a great sermon, or by hanging around with important people. True greatness doesn't come from impressing grownups. True greatness comes by being last, not first. True greatness comes by being willing to **serve** the very least among us.

So Jesus says to the disciples: "if you want to be great, welcome a child. And if you can't welcome a child, you can't welcome me or my Father."

"Welcoming a child in the name of Jesus" means welcoming as Jesus did. As a servant. Can you welcome a child by serving them? If you cannot welcome a child by serving them, you do not have a heart that can welcome God. It's not about being nice to children, or working with children or talking with children. It's about being able to SERVE children.

- **III** – I remember a story about a small church that started a youth group.

True story, here in Sydney. It was a small church that was almost about to have to close because of the small numbers they had. But a new youth leader was doing a great job of bringing young people into the church and teaching them about Jesus. Until one day, the "grownups" arrived one Sunday morning to find that a window in the hall had been broken. They assumed it was the youth group kids kicking a ball around inside. They were right. And they complained. Boy did they complain! You see, they were prepared to have a youth ministry, but they weren't prepared to serve those children in the way Jesus would serve. With sacrifice, patience and love. So the minister asked them a simple question: "What would you prefer – a church with no youth group and nice unbroken windows, or a church with a youth group and a broken window every now and then?"

The next week, the grownups came in to church and found paint stains on the carpet. The complaints started again. Until one of the members saw it and turned to the minister and said: "Isn't it great that we have children at our church!" And she just cleaned it up. Like a servant.

That story could be told of nearly every church I think. Jesus would ask – who are the true servants? Who are the ones welcoming children? Who are the ones serving the least among us? Who are the greatest in God's eyes? If you want to be truly great, great in God's eyes, then you must be prepared to be the very last among people, and the servant of all.

Of all of our relationships, why is serving children often the most difficult? Why does Jesus make them the example here to the disciples? Because serving children means a great deal of self sacrifice and humility, and often a lack of recognition. When we lead grownups, we're often recognised for our work with comments like: "Great sermon", "Great music", "Thanks for morning tea". "Thanks for leading us in prayer." "Thanks for the men's or women's event".

But it's not often that a child says to the Sunday school teacher – "That was a great lesson – thanks for all your hard work!", although one child said something like that to me after Kids' Club last week. And often, with children's work, you never get to find out the effects of your ministry work. Here's another exception – I got this email a couple of months ago from someone who used to come to kids club here. Here's the short version:

- *G'day All Saints Waitara,*

I used to go to your church when I was child. ... In December of 1997, we settled in the Hornsby/Waitara area and I attended the last two school weeks at Waitara Primary School. Luckily the house we moved into was almost next door to a boy called Brendan Cox, he attended kids cub on a Thursday after school at your church. He took me along to the last kids club for the year which he said was going to be a party, and thought I'd go along and enjoy the food! Little did I know that I was in for more than that...

As well as making friends with Brendan, I made friends with all at that church, including the pastor ... Eventually, I went to kids church on a Sunday...

the Sunday church I now go to (is) called Lighthouse Family Church. ...

More than 11 years after I first said sorry to God, I changed from the shy boy who had trouble making and keeping friends, and with no look to the future, to an almost 20yr old man of God who is now studying at uni to become a primary school teacher - a teacher who will impact the lives of young children as they take their first steps into life, as God did for me.

... for now, I can take comfort in thanking your church for sowing the seed of God into my life.

Garth McCrorie

A rare letter that shows the impact ministry to children has in the long term. Today, welcoming children and serving them the way Jesus serves, is still not work that is highly praised by people. People often find it easier, and “greater”, to do the work, the ministry, or the serving that receives the big praise from people.

Do you think that perhaps **you** can be a little like that sometimes? Do you enjoy doing the things that people notice? Only wanting to serve in ways that are **seen** and **recognised** as “greater” by the people of this world? You can tell a true servant of God by the way they serve the least among us. Because that’s the heart of Jesus – the heart that lead him to become the least among us, and to serve us by dying on a cross for our sin.

Let me finish by asking us all some questions - be honest with your answers: (refer to questionnaire on handout). These questions show it’s not just about being involved in children’s ministry. It’s about the attitudes of ALL of us and the way we welcome children in our lives. Just answer YES or NO – privately.

- **Powerpoint:**

1. Do you think conversations with adults are more important than conversations with children?
2. Do you ever try to have a conversation with a child over morning tea or supper after church?
3. Do you resent having to clean up after children?
4. Do you get frustrated when children are noisy or messy?
5. Do you believe that what children learn is more important than the mess they make while learning?
6. Do you cherish and appreciate the children we have at All Saints?
 - a. How in a practical sense? _____
7. Do you know what ministries to children we have here at All Saints?
 - a. Do you invite other children, or parents with children, to those activities?
8. When we talk about the church building work, do you consider the needs of our children above your own needs?
9. Are you/we devoting enough resources – such as time, money or space – to welcoming children:
 - a. In our own lives?
 - b. In our church?
10. Would you be prepared to spend more time with children here at church? (help, lead, train,...)

How did you go with those? ... Let me finish with just one more statistic:

In a recent Australian poll among Anglicans, 74% said they became a Christian before the age of 20

Ministry to young people is not only very, very, very important. It’s also a sign of whether or not we as a church, as Christians, have the servant heart of God. The people of God’s church should be **leading society** in the way we care for the least among us. So the question I want to leave you with is:

- “Can you **serve** a child?”

“...children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise.” And God loves them. Let’s love them too.