

Pentecost 20
6/10/2024

Mark the Evangelist

Job 1:1, 2:1-10

Psalm 26

Mark 10:2-16

Suffer the Little Children

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

What was your childhood like? My memories of my childhood are pretty good really – when I think about the times and places that I grew up in – the experiences our parents provided for us, the adventures we got into, the stories and music that surrounded us. It would be pretty easy to reminisce through the happy filters of my memory and forget many of the realities of childhood. Just for starters – time went so slowly. We had to wait such a long time for anything to happen. There were so many things that we longed to do but we couldn't because we hadn't learnt how, or we weren't big enough or strong enough. Kids weren't allowed, we couldn't go on our own, we didn't have our own transport. Don't forget the sting of the grazed knees, the terror of the dentist, the fickleness of playground friendships and the awful taste of wintertime tonics that were supposed to keep you safe from the hazards of poorly heated drafty classrooms.

Childhood was good to me, but it does not need to be idealized. The bible certainly doesn't do that. Reports of children in scriptures usually involves then getting sick and dying. One was very nearly sacrificed by his father. Another was given away by his mother to be a trainee priest. Another was found in a basket on the Nile. Baby boys in Bethlehem were massacred. Aged 12 Jesus got into big trouble for going AWOL in Jerusalem at festival time. Jesus' disciples turned the children away when they were brought to see him. Who would want to be a kid. It's all pretty typical. You can't come here because you are not old enough, or strong enough, or clever enough. You are subject to the authority of big people who have power.

In the bible, when you talk about children, you are talking about the most vulnerable, the most in need of rescue from a dangerous world. They are the ones whose survival is most precarious, yet they are the ones on whose shoulders the survival of the future depends. These were the ones that the disciples turned away. These were the ones on whose behalf Jesus rebuked the disciples. These were the ones that Jesus received. These were the ones that Jesus enfolded in his arms and blessed them.

By means of this story children have had a special place in the life of the church. Children were especially blest by Jesus, therefore the church has felt a call to provide blessing for children. What many churches lament these days is the lack of children it has to bless.

The department of Government Services wrote to me a few weeks ago.

Dear Peter Blackwood, Your Working with Children Check [long convoluted number] expires on [a date about a month away].

To continue doing child-related work, you will need to renew your Check. The renewal process is online and includes uploading a new photo.

The photo you upload must be less than 12 months old and of passport quality. To view the Requirements for an acceptable photo for your Working with Children Check, go to – and a link address was inserted. I know you will be relieved to hear that this week I got another email to say that my new working with children card is in the mail. I passed the photo test.

In my last job as a church bureaucrat one of my tasks was to attend settlement negotiations in which the church was required to compensate people for abuse that they experienced from employees of the church while they were in our care, and I was instructed by our church to offer an apology on behalf of the church for what happened to them. As far as I know the UCA was the only denomination to have senior staff attend these conferences with the lawyers and offer a personal apology on behalf of the church.

In my last job as a church bureaucrat, I was required to attend a state parliamentary inquiry into institutional child abuse. Our church, in response to Jesus' example to receive children and care for them, inadvertently harboured a culture in which abuse flourished, and in our naivety that escalated into criminal negligence our church stood culpable in the eyes of society.

When his disciples turned away children they received a corrective word from Jesus. When the church of Jesus Christ has been implicated in the abuse of children the corrective word of God has come by way of government requirement. I am not complaining that I am required to renew my working with children check. This is a good thing the government requires of me.

It is kind of annoying and certainly embarrassing that the word of the Lord reminding us that Jesus received children and blessed them has its best effect, not by hearing this story every three years by this lectionary reading, but by social requirements imposed by government.

Let's turn back to these few verses from Mark's gospel. The disciples got it wrong and they needed correction. So what is being proclaimed into our context?

I dare to suggest two things.

Firstly, and obviously the gospel proclaims that the least powerful, the ones least endowed with life's wisdom and experience and time to gain accomplishment in good deeds or virtuous endeavour, the ones turned away, are the very ones that Jesus received to be touched and blessed. Not only that. The kingdom of God belongs very particularly to them. This we learn from the account of the disciples, the children and Jesus but it is not only the children who are found to be powerless, denied opportunity to accomplish or are turned away. Other accounts in Scripture reveal those who were especially prized by Jesus, the Samaritan woman at the well, Mary Magdalene, the man, sick for 38 years who lay by the pool at the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem, the Gerasene demonic who lived among the tombs, to name just a few.

Of course, God didn't just invent this particular concern when the Father sent God's Son. Hebrew Scripture prescribes it. The Torah lists requirements of social behaviour and interaction that is especially directed for the benefit of the widow, the orphan and the stranger. This is most beautifully illustrated in the story of Ruth and the gleaning laws at harvest time that deliberately leaves grain that falls from the reapers' arms, and corners of the field left uncut for the widows, the orphans and the stranger, the foreigner, the refugee.

God requires that the little ones, the powerless, are provided special care.

Secondly, our experience as the church, not just the UCA, but churches across the world facing government instigated inquiries and commissions into abuse and neglect of the powerless, comes as a reminder that the gospel that God declares in Christ is sometimes born down upon the church, not by bible readings, prayers, hymns, liturgies. It is this sobering thought. The society in which the church exists so often requires of us the same things that God requires of us. Sometimes it is our duty to remind society of what God requires and sometimes we need to humbly hear society reminding the church what God requires.

I will conclude with this little story concerning two school students. During this week I have been preparing this sermon. I had remembered the gleaning laws that helped Ruth and Naomi survive when they were most powerless. Friday was the saint's day for Francis of Assisi who taught about the care of the poor and powerless to an extreme degree. On Thursday and Friday I was conducting a school holiday program attended by six young people who wanted to learn about painting icons. I had decided that they would learn by painting an icon of Mary the mother of Jesus. Two of them decided they didn't want to paint Mary. They were our little rebel corner. I swallowed my old schoolteacher self that would usually not tolerate such defiance and decided to help them do what they wanted. The result was two beautiful icons, one of Ruth and the other of St Francis.
