

The Little Children and Jesus

- *This was the sermon I preached in Errol & Kilspindie, but John Pickering was preaching on the same passage in Fintry at the same time, as part of our "March through Mark". I have no idea what he said, but here's what I said in Errol & Kilspindie...*

Intro: How we treat children

- Our society places a very **high value on children**:
 - and that is in part down to passages in the Scriptures such as this one!
- If you doubt that we place a high value on kids, think of this:
 - amount we spend on **education**;
 - the special place **children's hospitals and hospice's have** - for instance, we probably have a more positive gut reaction to hearing someone works in a children's intensive care ward than in a care of the elderly ward;
 - the incredible measures we take now to **protect children with whom we are working**: child-protection co-ordinators, Disclosure forms, etc....!
- **We, as a society as well as individuals, desire the best for children and are shocked and outraged when a child is harmed or at risk**:
 - where I was as Dunblane happened;
 - horror at Victoria Colimbe case, for instance...
- We are probably **not even aware** that this is a value we hold:
 - it seems so obviously the way things **should** be, we can't imagine anyone thinking differently!

How children were treated in the 1st century

- But it has not always been so (isn't so in other parts of the world today)
 - eg, child workers in Victorian Britain;
- **More specifically, in Jesus' day children were very much looked down on, denigrated, thought of as nothing**.
 - how a decision affected a child was never a consideration;
 - they were not thought to be able to be part of God's Kingdom until the age of 12
 - that's why the Bar Mitzvah is to this day a very important stage in a Jewish boy's life!
 - they were **weak, powerless, voiceless**;
 - **probably not helped by high infant mortality rates - not worth caring much for a child if they only had a 50/50 chance of survival?**
- This is the context into which Jesus comes to speak and to act as he did in this passage.

Jesus' attitude to children

- First thing this passage has to say to us concerns Jesus' attitude to children.
- **It is abundantly clear that his attitude was welcoming, open, receptive, concerned for them, very much positive towards them**:
 - when they are excluded, he includes them;
 - when they are rejected, he accepts them;
 - when they are made to feel unwelcome, he opens his arms to them.
- Now I hope that isn't a great surprise to us!!
- In fact, I see it as a great affirmation of much that we as churches do:
 - think, for a moment, of all the people across Scotland who are leaders with a week by week commitment to their sphere of activity;
 - a very high proportion of those people are involved in working with children;
 - **Sunday School, Bible Class, Youth Fellowship, Boys Brigade, Girls Brigade, Guides & Brownies**
- We will always have room for improvement, but that we are not completely off-beam in terms of our overall priorities is a great encouragement!

- Also gives us cause to **renew our commitment** to welcoming and encouraging young people:
 - how can we ensure that we are welcoming - in worship, in the creche, in Sunday School and Bible Class?
 - how do we guard against excluding them?
 - how do ensure we don't reject their contribution to the life of the whole family of the church?

On receiving and entering the kingdom

- But Jesus went on to do more than simply welcome and affirm the place of children:
 - he went on to explain something of the Kingdom using children as his example!
- (v.14b,15) Jesus said: "the kingdom of God belongs to **such as these**. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."
- This is one of those places where it is important to be clear what the passage is **not** saying!!
 - **not** "Kingdom of Heaven belongs to these" - ie children
 - its not a case of "all children are little angels and are automatically in the Kingdom!"
 - *the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.*
- Rather, what Jesus is doing is **making a comparison** - spelled out in v.15:
 - what then was the point of this comparison that Jesus made between kids and the receiving and entering the Kingdom of God?
- **Weakness/denigration was key characteristic**
- Again, need to remember what is not being said:
 - comparison is **not** with modern psychological characteristics given to children - trust, simplicity, innocence.... but only to the key characteristic for someone from the 1st century, **weakness!**
- Jesus is saying that we must receive the Kingdom of God in weakness and powerlessness:
 - we have no ability to effect any action to benefit ourselves;
 - **we are sinners! Mired in sin and powerless to save ourselves;**
- So what is needed is the **repentant plea for help**, that coming to Jesus, inviting him to be Lord of our lives and accepting his death on the Cross as the only hope of rescue.
 - if we won't come like that, repentant, then we can't come at all.

Conclusion

- As we finish, I hope we've been affirmed in the importance we place on children in our midst, particularly in the church.
- And I hope we've been reminded again of the starting point of all our faith:
 - **repentance, an acknowledgement of our helplessness as sinners.**
- Let me close by opening up a couple of analogies that might prove thought provoking:
 - first, when the disciples stood between the children and Jesus, Jesus really laid into them! (**indignant, scolded, irate, very displeased**); he went on to compare those who enter the Kingdom with those powerless children - **how will it be for us if we stand between someone and the Kingdom of God?**
 - the second analogy is, I suppose, the flip side of the first! In contrast to the disciples shooing away the children, Jesus welcomes them, hugs them, blesses them - **a real warmth, not just formal acceptance**; how do we welcome those enter the Kingdom, who come amongst us as new believers? More than just the "good to see you with us" at a service, but the attitude of care that seeks to enter their world, support, care for, **bless** them...

- May we be those who: welcome children, who come to Christ like children, and who welcome those come to Christ with the same warmth we welcome children!