

Children are brilliant, aren't they? You never know what they are about to do or say. It's not for nothing that actors will tell you that you should never work with children or animals – they are both so unpredictable. It's not for nothing that I get a sense of trepidation when Kids Time With God come forward to show us what they've done because I never know what they're going to say. I love it!

In the passage we've just heard, small children are brought to Jesus and the story ensues. The gospeller is talking here of little children and not anyone old enough to be in year seven or above, when they still have that wide-eyed and inquisitive approach to life before the cynicism of being a teenager has crept in. They are so often so accurate in their observations of the world because they see things in a very natural, simplistic way. And they have such a natural relationship with God too. I have a book (still on a boat somewhere in the harbour) called "Dear God" and it is filled with prayers small children have written to the Almighty. Here are a selection of them:

Arnold, age 8, wrote: "Dear God, I know you love everybody but you haven't met my sister."

A ten year old named Tom, wrote these words: "Dear God, if you give everybody brains I think you forgot about my best friend Mary."

Carla wrote: "Dear God, Are there any devils on earth? I think there may be one in my class."

It is obvious from this that children are painfully honest. They are unlike adults in that they do not care to conceal the truth. In our text, Jesus tells His disciples that men must receive the kingdom of God like children. Jesus did not say that we had to become children, but rather that they must become child-like, in some way, in order to enter the kingdom of God. The question that we must answer, then, is, "In what sense must we become child-like in order to enter the kingdom of God?" The answer to this question is not so universally agreed upon, nor does it lie on the surface, for us to quickly determine. And yet if we desire to enter into the kingdom of God, the answer is vitally important. It is no mere matter of curiosity or intellectual pursuit.

Our reading today contains two major paragraphs, describing two separate, but related incidents. The first contains Luke's description of our Lord's response to the disciples' attempt to hinder parents bringing their children to Jesus, for Him to touch, to pray for, and thus, to bless. The second paragraph contains the incident of the "rich young ruler," who came to Jesus to learn what he must do in order to obtain eternal life, along with the response of Jesus and His disciples.

There is a thread of continuity which ties these two paragraphs together as both paragraphs deal with how men enter into the kingdom of God. In the first paragraph, child-likeness is an aid, an essential element. In the second paragraph, being rich is a hindrance. Thus, in this passage, as so often in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus reversed the values of His day. Even the disciples were astounded at what Jesus said here.

And it's not surprising that they were astounded because it was such a radical departure from the agreed norm. It was believed by most God-fearing Jews that the salvation of the whole Jewish race was dependant upon adherence to the whole of the Jewish law. The whole of the scriptures pointed towards the arrival of the Messiah (the "anointed one") at some future time. Here, Jesus focusses upon the nature of those who would inherit the kingdom, rather than what they have or have not done. He emphasises their nature rather than their works – their childlikeness and generosity rather than their adherence to rules.

To put the matter in more contemporary terms, the issue at hand is, "Who are those who will go to heaven?"

It was such an important matter that Jesus could urge the rich young ruler to give up all of his wealth to be added to that group who would enter into eternal life. The issues of our text are eternal ones. Nothing matters more in this life, or the next, than the things which Jesus is speaking of here.

Today, I'll focus on the first of the stories though, of Jesus responding to the lack of welcome his followers gave to the children and the people who were bringing them to him. There are several questions which arise from these three short verses, questions which are essential to understanding this incident, its meaning, and its application:

- (1) Why did Jesus react so strongly to their efforts to hinder the children from being brought to Him?
- (2) Why did the disciples seek to prevent the parents from bringing their children to Jesus?

(3) What is the specific characteristic of child-likeness to which our Lord is referring, which is necessary for anyone to enter into the kingdom?

Firstly, why would Jesus react so strongly to the actions of His disciples? It's not evident in the Lucan narrative but in Mark's gospel we read that Jesus was "indignant" because of the actions of His disciples. Jesus really was greatly distressed by them. His indignation comes, I think, from the fact that his disciples have not realised that the way in which children were freely accepted by our Lord was similar to the way in which all men must enter into the kingdom of God. We are all his children, after all – who are we to judge the wisdom of ourselves as being superior to that of a child? Childish simplicity is often a lot clearer in its understanding than adult complexity.

The simplicity in the way children approach Jesus is something that we adults have lost. If we are to truly understand the joy and wonder of what God did for us through his son, then it is vital that we approach him in the same way a child would.

The second question has to do with the reason why the disciples sought to hinder the children from being brought to Jesus in the first place. Probably the disciples resisted the children for the very reason(s) the Lord welcomed them. It is not difficult to imagine how things may have gotten to this point. The disciples had probably taken on themselves the self-appointed task of "filtering" those who were allowed to "get through" to Jesus. There were just too many people, they could have reasoned, for all to be allowed to approach Him. When a powerful or influential person sought access to Jesus, I suspect that the disciples facilitated his approach, reasoning that this man could do much for their cause. When someone who was very sick approached Jesus, the disciples might have allowed them to get through because the miracle which Jesus performed would be good publicity. (If all this seems too calculating, too unspiritual, take a look at the disciples' discussions and disputes among themselves, as to who would be the greatest, and who would sit closest to our Lord, with the greatest power.)

When babies were brought to Jesus, to be blessed, it seemed like an unnecessary and an unprofitable bother to Jesus, and so the disciples took it upon themselves to send the parents and children away, giving them the impression that they should not "bother" Jesus in this way. They hindered the children from coming to Jesus because they were not significant enough, because they had nothing to offer. They were "takers," but not "givers." They were a liability, not an asset, to the cause of the kingdom, or so the disciples thought. Jesus set the disciples straight. The children were to be allowed to come to Him for a blessing. The third question is the most important one: What is it that characterizes a child, which must characterize the way we receive the kingdom of God?

Our text provides us with several important clues. First, our text informs us that the children who come to Jesus are very young children. Luke tells us, in fact, that they are babies. Babies do not trust, nor do they practice humility. Babies are carried to Jesus. They make no conscious decisions. They speak no words. They understand no words. Everything is done for them. Contrast this with the rich young ruler who speaks of his "works" from the point of his childhood onward. It's all about *what he has done – his achievements*.

By contrast with the young man, if we would come to Jesus for a blessing, we must not come in our own strength, we must not come through our own understanding, our own wisdom, our own good works. We can only come to Christ in our helpless state, looking to Him and to His grace alone. We must come out of our weakness and helpless state, not out of our own righteousness.

Our salvation is not dependant on our worldly things. Nor is it due to anything we ever consciously do. It is given, in our helplessness, by the love of God alone.