

Jesus Welcomes the Little Ones

Luke 18:15–17

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In my previous parish, when I became their Minister, the church did not have a children's ministry, and there were no children in the congregation. It was a church made up largely of adults and older people. But they had a desire and a vision to see the church grow. They wanted to restart and develop a children's ministry, and they wanted to see young families become part of the church. The challenge was that they did not know how to make that happen.

When they called me and invited me to become their Vicar, I think, in a small but significant way, God began to answer their prayers. I came with my young family. Angela and Nathan were still quite small at the time. Suddenly, the church had two young children among them.

But there was something else as well. Both Guan and I shared their desire and vision. We had a heart for children and for seeing the church grow. So the arrival of our family was not simply about bringing two children into the congregation. It also brought people who shared the church's prayer and vision for the next generation.

At that time, I already had several years of parish ministry experience, and Guan and I had both ideas and practical experience of organising Sunday school and other special events. But when we arrived at this new church, we didn't rush into starting new programs. We took our time. We got to know the congregation, listened, thought and prayed about what might be appropriate for that particular church.

Eventually, when we felt the time was right, I developed a plan to launch a ministry called Messy Church. Messy Church originated in the UK. The idea is to provide a different expression of church where children and their parents or grandparents can come together, be creative, have fun and, yes, get a little messy! Each Messy Church gathering would have a Bible-based theme, explored creatively through songs, stories, craft activities and a shared meal.

Guan and I had already run Messy Church in our previous church, so we knew from experience how it worked and what was involved. We knew starting Messy Church in our new parish was going to be quite a significant undertaking and would require many volunteers from the congregation. So I presented the idea and the plan at our annual parish meeting. Most people welcomed the proposal, but I also remember that some were rather bemused by the name "Messy Church." During the meeting, one respectable older gentleman raised his hand and made a comment that I have never forgotten. He said, "Why is this program called Messy Church, when being messy is the very last thing we want our church to be?"

I understood exactly where he was coming from. We want our church to be clean, orderly, reverent, dignified and beautiful. We don't want our church to be dirty, chaotic, noisy or irreverent. But then I thought, "We also don't want our church to be empty, do we?" We want to be a church that welcomes people. We want to make room for children and young families. We want people to feel they belong here. And sometimes, if we are serious about welcoming people, we have to be willing to surrender some of our preferences for order and comfort. We have to be able to tolerate a little mess, a little noise and perhaps even a little godly chaos.

So, in that parish, we went ahead and launched Messy Church as an outreach ministry in the church building. A wonderful group of volunteers came forward to help with the different aspects of the ministry. It became a fruitful outreach. We welcomed many parents and children from across the town, and over time we saw some of them become part of the church family.

And that comment from that respectable gentleman came back to my mind when I was reflecting on our Gospel reading for today.

The children come to Jesus

We can picture the scene in our minds. Jesus is teaching, and many people have gathered around him. He has been teaching about the kingdom of God. Adults are listening. Important matters are being discussed. And then parents begin bringing babies and little children to Jesus. Luke tells us: "People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them" (Luke 18:15).

There is something very ordinary about what is happening. These parents simply want Jesus to bless their children. But the disciples didn't like it. Luke says, "When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them."

Luke doesn't explicitly tell us why the disciples did this. We should therefore be careful not to claim that we know exactly what was going through their minds. But the most natural explanation is that they regarded these children as an interruption. Jesus was teaching. He had important work to do. There were important people to speak to and important matters to deal with. Perhaps they thought, "Surely this is not the time for babies and little children." Perhaps, in their minds, the children could come later.

But Jesus sees the situation very differently. Luke tells us, "But Jesus called the children to him and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.'" (v. 16)

The disciples thought the children were an interruption to Jesus' ministry. They thought there were more important things for Jesus to be doing. But Jesus says, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them..."

What did people think about children?

We should be careful not to imagine that people in the first century did not love their children. They certainly did. The very fact that these parents brought their babies to Jesus shows that they

loved them and wanted God's blessing for them. But children in the ancient world generally had little social status, power or independence. They were dependent upon adults and did not have the social standing or influence that adults possessed.

And that helps us understand the disciples' response. The children were not necessarily despised. Rather, we were regarded as less important in comparison with the adults. And isn't there something here that speaks to us today?

We live in a very different culture, and in many ways we greatly value children. Parents devote enormous amounts of time, energy and resources to their children. We have children's healthcare, education, child protection and safeguarding. We take the wellbeing of children very seriously. So it would be wrong to say that people today don't value children.

But there is another, subtler mentality that can still exist. Children can be loved and valued, and yet still be regarded as an inconvenience. We see it when children are regarded as a disturbance because they are noisy. We see it when a baby cries during a church service. We see it when children make it difficult for adults to have a quiet conversation. And we can see it when young families are regarded primarily as people who need to be accommodated rather than as people who have something to contribute to the life of the church.

None of this necessarily comes from hostility towards children. Often it comes from something much more innocent: "Adults are doing something important; children can wait." And that can happen in church: "We need to keep the service quiet." "Perhaps the parents should take the baby outside." "Children's ministry can happen somewhere else while the adults worship." None of these statements is necessarily wrong in itself. Sometimes a parent should take a crying baby outside. The issue is not whether we ever make practical arrangements for children. The deeper question is: "What is our underlying attitude towards children?" Do we see them as an inconvenience to the church? Or do we see them as part of the church family whom Jesus himself welcomes?

"Do not hinder them"

Jesus says, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them." Notice the words "do not hinder." The disciples were creating a barrier between Jesus and the children. And Jesus says, "Don't do that." That gives us a very important question to ask ourselves as a church. We might never deliberately say, "We don't want children here." I don't think you would find many churches that would say that. But we can unintentionally create barriers. Sometimes the barrier is our expectations, sometimes it is our preferences, sometimes it is simply our unwillingness to tolerate a little noise, movement or mess. And so perhaps the question we should ask is not simply: "Do we welcome children?" I think we would all say yes. The more searching question is, "Is there anything about the way we conduct our church that might unintentionally make it harder for children as young families to come to Jesus?" That is a question worth asking.

Children are not merely the future church

And this is particularly important for us at St Augustine's Unley. We rejoice that we have children among us. We pray that God will bring more children and young families into our

church. We have identified “nurturing the next generation” as one of the key priorities in our Mission Action Plan. But there is a danger in thinking of children simply as the future church. Of course, children are the future of the church. We want to see them grow up in the faith and, God willing, become mature Christian disciples. But they are not merely the future church. They are part of the church now. They are people whom Christ welcomes now. And that means we have a responsibility not simply to provide something for children, but to help them know and experience that they belong among God’s people. And this is something that adults and older people can do wonderfully well. Our older members have something precious to give to younger Christians: wisdom, prayer, experience, biblical knowledge, stories of God’s faithfulness, and examples of perseverance in following Christ.

And children and young families also have something precious to give to the adults and older members of the church: joy, energy, hope and the encouragement of seeing another generation growing in faith. The Christian church is not meant to be divided into separate generations who happen to use the same building.

“The kingdom of God belongs to such as these”

But Jesus’ words go even further. He doesn’t simply say, “Children are welcome.” He says, “The kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” What does he mean? At the most immediate level, Jesus is saying that children are not outsiders to God’s kingdom. They are not too young to be welcomed by Jesus.

But then Jesus goes further. He says, “Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” Jesus is using children to teach all of us how the kingdom of God is received. And the key word is “receive” – we must receive the kingdom of God like a child.

How does a child receive the kingdom of God? Well, a little child has no impressive credentials. A baby cannot say, “God, look at what I have achieved. I have been a good person. I deserve your blessing.” A baby simply receives, and that fits beautifully with the wider teaching of Luke’s Gospel.

Immediately before this passage, Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee comes before God thinking about his achievements: “I fast twice a week; I give a tenth...” But the tax collector simply says, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” And Jesus says that this man, the tax collector who went home justified, finding favour in the sight of God. Then immediately after the story of the children comes the story of the rich ruler. Here is a man with many achievements, possessions and credentials. He asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life.

Luke places these two stories for a reason. On one side we have the Pharisee and the rich ruler - people with things to present to God. On the other side we have the children - who have nothing to boast before God. And Jesus says, “Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

The kingdom of God is not something we deserve, it is not something we earn; it is a gift of God's grace. And therefore, we come to God with empty hands, we come humbly, we come trusting in what God has done for us in Christ. That is how we receive the kingdom.

We need to become dependent upon God

This is something particularly challenging for us as adults. As we grow older, we spend much of our lives learning to become independent. We learn to walk, we learn to speak, we go to school, we get a job, we earn money, we make decisions, we become responsible for ourselves and eventually perhaps responsible for others. Independence is generally a good thing.

But spiritually, we never graduate beyond our dependence upon God. In fact Christian maturity is not learning that we need God less. Christian maturity is learning more deeply how much we need God. The older we become in Christ, the more we should be able to say, "Lord, I have nothing to boast about. Everything I have is a gift from you. I depend upon your grace. I depend upon your mercy. I depend upon Christ."

That is what Jesus means when he says that we must receive the kingdom like a little child.

So, what does this mean for us?

I want to return to that respectable gentleman from my previous parish. He asked, "Why is this called Messy Church, when being messy is the very last thing we want our church to be?" There was some truth in his question. We should want our churches to be places of beauty, good order and reverence. But Jesus' words in Luke 18 challenge us to ask what we are willing to give up in order to welcome those whom Jesus welcomes. Sometimes welcoming children means tolerating a little mess or noise, sometimes it means changing our expectations, sometimes it means giving up something that we personally prefer, sometimes it means making room.

And perhaps that applies not only to children. Jesus was known as someone who welcomed ordinary people – the sick, the needy, the socially marginalised, the "sinners" – people whom others overlooked. And so the question for us is broader: Are we the kind of church that welcomes the people whom Jesus welcomes? Are we willing to make room for young families, for newcomers, for people who don't yet know how to "behave in church," for people whose lives are messy? Because the gospel is about grace, and grace means that people don't have to get everything sorted out before they can come to Jesus.

Amen.