

‘Suffer the little children to come unto me, for of such is the Kingdom of God’. That’s the way the Authorised Version translates this passage. Rob our former Youth Worker used to have a game with Robert our Interim Minister, of moving the font around the church, Rob would put the word **suffer** at the front! Robert would put the word **Children** at the front.

It’s a great irony, that in English these words actually mean the very opposite of what they look like. They appear to suggest that the children will suffer, whereas in fact what they mean is that ‘we’ should suffer, ‘put up with’ any discomfort that helps children to feel welcome.

I want to talk about 3 things today. Our desire as a church to reach out to children. The biblical model and some research, which suggests how we can pass faith on to children. And thirdly ‘our disconnect’ – my observation of why we are not connecting as we hope and what might we be able to do about it.

1. This church has a heart for children; that is evidenced by the number of early childhood educators, teachers, and teacher educators who come here. It’s evidenced by the money and effort we have poured into St Peters Childcare over not just the last 2 years but the last 37 years. When we filled our mission surveys two years ago most of you ranked mission to families, mission to children very highly. I see so many of you praying for children and praying for your own children and grandchildren. I don’t doubt that we have a heart for children in this church. We invested in an Associate Minister whose primary focus was on ministry with children and families. She loves kids so much she’s gone and had one of her own, and she’s got another on the way. The Mathee family stayed with us because they got such a warm welcome at our first service when they first came, and we love seeing little ones running around at both services. Not a problem with heart.

2. What does the Bible say about kids, well let’s start with Jesus. Right here in Mark 10 Jesus tells his disciples to stop blocking parents who were wanting to bring their children to Jesus. Parents just wanted Jesus to take little ‘Joseph’ and little ‘Maggie’ in his arms and bless them. I believe that children can be baptised and I am prepared to dedicate children, but Jesus’ practice is neither Baptism nor Dedication. He just hugs the kids and blesses them. Let’s not be too theologically clever about this, he put his hand on their heads and said ‘bless you’. He wished God’s blessing on the children; it didn’t mean they never got sick, it didn’t mean they would make a lot of money, it didn’t mean they would get into a better school: it just meant that they were included in everything Jesus was announcing about God’s Kingdom. In fact, he said that their trusting acceptance was a model of faith.

Let’s have some fun: Let’s recreate the scene. Who wants to be Jesus? Who wants to be the parents, is there anyone with a baby or a child wanting to join in? And now we need disciples. Ok it’s easy. Jesus was teaching. And Mary and Simon wanted Jesus to bless their child ‘get the prophet to bless him’ I wouldn’t be surprised if they didn’t want a selfie to show baby that she was blessed by Jesus. And here are the disciples, pushing her away. Don’t bother him. He’s got important things to do, his message is for adults. Remember the disciples were all unmarried young men who are a bit self-important, just go home, this is not for women and children.

And Jesus turns and say ‘whoa. No! let them come, let parents come to me. They are attracted to my message, and you know what these children are included in what I’m on about’.

He didn’t say, but he could have; ‘in fact my parables are developmentally targeted so that even a young child can grasp what I’m saying’.

He didn't say, but he could have; 'in fact my teaching style is aimed at the whole family, the world is my classroom, and my task is to empower parents to embody the Kingdom with their families'.

And he definitely didn't say; 'yes you're right, you need to have a certain cognitive ability, a certain rank in the community, and a certain moral agency before I can do anything for you'. In fact he said the opposite.

(Thanks Actors)

What he did say was that the kingdom of God belongs to such as these young children, not yet smart nor schooled nor even aware of their sins; in God's Kingdom children can lead, and if we don't adopt their **very simple, personal, trusting** response to Jesus, we will never get it.

So far from making an accommodation for children, and saying 'yes they have a place too', Jesus welcomed the parents and blesses the children saying these children can teach us something, this is the topsy-turvy world of the gospel.

In fact, Jesus had been trying to make just this point. In Mark 9:36 Jesus invited a child to come and stand before his disciples, and then he took that child in his arms. Jesus gave the kid a big hug and lifted him up and said this is how we should welcome people, when you welcome a child you welcome me. That child would not have remembered what Jesus said, he may have remembered what Jesus did, but I bet he remembered how he felt when he met Jesus. Jesus was an expert at Aural, Visual, Kinaesthetic and Emotive Education.

In summary, kids mattered to Jesus. Kids matter to Jesus – and it wasn't just the cognitive, cerebral stuff he could pass on, we tend to make church very heady. But Jesus clearly modelled a community of learning. Do any of you ever remember group projects? At School, at university? At work? I hated group projects as a student. I was always the diligent one who felt like I had to do twice as much to make sure we got the grade.

But life is a group project, when we see Salvation as only an individual transaction between us and God, then we have missed Jesus teaching about the Kingdom. Yes, there is an individual decision that we all need to make to commit our lives to Christ; but central to Salvation is Jesus joining us to his Church. And that's part of what was going on in this passage.

Churches can be rough places, we get hurt and we can hurt, but God did not design us to worship alone. For all of us there will be times in our lives that we are tempted to hide and separate from church. And for a time that is fine. But not for too long.

I want to point you to Deuteronomy 6:7 where Moses tells parents to pass on faith, '*Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up,*' - clearly 'teaching' in Deuteronomy does not just happen in the class room. It is a whole of life experience. And I think we need to recover that sense, that we as parents and friends are faith educators all the time.

There is a piece of research looking at young adults who stayed in the church, the single strongest driver of passing faith is a parent who modelled genuine Christian Growth, far more than any Sunday school, youth group or Christian school. This is about being real, praying and reading your bible not just saying you do. It is also about owning our struggles and how we can work through them.

And there is a second option because not every child has a believing father or mother, and that is children and youth – who have someone who steps into the loco-parentus-spiritus role. De Veries "*they had developed significant connections with an extended family of adults within the church.*"

It's not a formal role, it is someone who invests deeply in that child – young person, like grandmas who pray daily for their grandkids. It's not a lovely teacher at school who loves your child equally with the 120 other students.

It is some-one who recognises a child as some-one.

3. Disconnect. Somehow over the last few years despite our goal to love children, disciple them and teach them we have had a bit of disconnect. Unintentionally we have sent our kids out to be taught, and paid people to do that. And there's nothing wrong with that. We've had people do a fine job of that, Wendy and Cate and Julz, and Robyn and Corne and Steph and Pat. But somehow we have disconnected (just a bit), somehow our behaviours haven't matched our intentions. Somehow our roster of people willing to volunteer has trimmed. Today I want to suggest, regardless of who we might have staffing our role in the future, we need a culture change. A change so that whoever is on KIC doesn't end up, cleaning up, on their own while everyone else has coffee. A change so that when children come into worship, we are willing to suffer, a bit of disruption, if you can't hear, sit in the front row. Maybe we might have an occasional kids song. But more than that, what I really want you to do church, is to see the kids who come as someone. Don't worry about our numbers – love the ones we have.

Wouldn't it be better if there were specific kids that we missed.

O I missed Bella today, I wonder how she is?

What would it be like if you wrote a wee note, saying missed you today –

I hope your week is going well. How's your brother?

Lucy used to get those sort of notes from Cate, and she loved them. The challenge for us as a church is that many of you are busy professionals, it's for us to pay a children's worker but they cannot replace us as a community welcoming and actually getting to know and love the children in our midst as individuals. If we love the children and youth who come, more will come.

Igirlz, Darlene has a great bunch of girls who turn up in a Tuesday night, I used to lead them for a couple of years. I know they are great. But she is desperately short of leaders. Two hours on a Tuesday night?

Three responses I'm looking for:

1. A list of people today who will say, I'll volunteer in Children's Ministry, tell me where I can serve. Now I'm not going to make it too easy. There is no clip board. You need to email me.

2. A group of people who will go away and think and pray and then offer, to spiritually adopt one of our kids – Little Sunbeams, - KIC – Playgroup – and beyond. But here's the rub, this loco-parentus-spiritus isn't for two weeks. It's for life. This is the ancient role of god-mother, god-father.

3. Let's all commit to making children and those younger than us feel welcome at church. Let's commit to enduring a little suffering to make others welcome. Have you ever heard of RBF, Resting B Face, Wikipedia defines it this way. 'a facial expression that unintentionally appears as if a person is angry, annoyed, irritated, or contemptuous, particularly when the individual is relaxed, resting or not expressing any particular emotion.'

Lets work on our Resting Smiley Faces.

Amen.