

And for your Children

Genesis 48; Ephesians 6; Luke 18
Minster and Molescroft 26.6.16

A friend of mine worked in Archbishop Rowan Williams' office. She handled the public affairs brief, which meant liaising with Buckingham Palace, Downing Street, Parliament, the Bank of England and the great institutions of state. I asked her once what was the most difficult aspect of her job. "Moving him on at the end of a visit to a primary school", she said. Archbishop Rowan simply loved being with children. And they knew it, and they wouldn't let him go either. My best tip for assessing the measure of a church leader? See which one is playing in the children's area.

It has been my privilege twice to be a speaker at the national conference of diocesan children's advisers in the Church of England. They are a superb bunch: it's hard to think of a more creative imaginative and supportive group. And it's also hard to think of a group which feels more marginalised and neglected in the church. Other areas of church life, like mission or social action or ministry development or even church buildings get resources and publicity and investment and involvement. Children's work is all too easily forgotten, or, worse, patted on the head every now and again and told to toddle off and carry on. Much like the experience of many children in church. Those churches that still have them.

Of course we don't want to harm children. Of course we want them to be happy. Of course we don't set out to make things difficult for them. It's just that, much of the time, we don't actively organise ourselves to ensure that our church life is fruitful and happy and nourishing for them. Children don't write letters of complaint. Children are not our major financial givers. Children's work is not a major income stream. So, most of the time, children don't get planned for, or actively thought about. They are an afterthought. It's not deliberate. It just is.

We have an event called Time Out here. On Tuesday mornings children and their carers gather in the Parish Hall. Up to five years ago it had no budget, and any toys or resources had to be bought out of the contributions given for coffee by those who came – the very people we as a church were reaching out to. Though we had an active and well-resourced youth ministry, there was little staff involvement with Time Out, or Sunday Club. Other areas of church life were more insistent, louder, more pressing. That has changed. Our engagement with the very young, and their families, has grown over the last four years. But it's all too easy to forget, because the very youngest have little voice.

All the churches I have ministered in have had a window much like the first window in the South Nave aisle in Beverley Minster. The Victorians liked making children visible in stained glass, and the image of Jesus blessing children is found in church after church. In our window it is set alongside another blessing: that of Jacob, also called 'Israel', blessing Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's sons, as Israel nears the end of his life. The Minster's window is in memory of the daughter of the Vicar, Miss Birtwhistle, whose ministry among children was greatly valued. I think it's the window which started off the pattern of Old Testament/New Testament linked stories, and I'm pleased that it children are at the heart of that pattern.

Do not think for a minute that a focus on children in the Bible is sentimental or comforting. Often the stories are about overturning established thinking. Children ask awkward questions. What we want for our children causes us to hold up a mirror to our own

assumptions, and what we will see is not always easy to take. The Minster's window, pleasant though it looks, focusses on two stories of overturning established thinking. In Genesis 48 Joseph brings his father's grandsons for the traditional blessing, expecting the greater blessing for his firstborn, Manasseh. Jacob blesses Ephraim in this way instead. We cannot always contain or constrain God by what we think are established patterns. God is God, and the new and fresh life of children should keep us on our toes.

When people bring children to Jesus the adults shoo them away. Jesus has more important things to do, more important people to speak with. Not so, says Jesus. If you want to receive the Kingdom of God, look at how a child receives. By the time you get to be an adult we are full of the effects of selfishness, entitlement, pride, self importance. We can convince ourselves that the love of God is only what we should expect. Look at how a child receives love. Instinctively and totally. It is the air they breathe, not the reward they expect. It is about their complete dependence, not their generous acceptance. Humble yourselves, says Jesus. It's about God, not how good you are.

A focus on children overturns things. In the Jewish Passover tradition it is the questions asked by the youngest person in the room which takes the observance forward. Sometimes it is the clarity of the simplest question which shines a light on the most complex of situations. We should create the situations for children to be able to ask such things. And that means we should ask ourselves what we want for our children. In many churches what we want for our children is that they should be quiet so we don't get disturbed by them. Or we just have a sense that there should be some children, but don't do much to make their presence possible.

There is a pattern on the Old Testament of the people of God doing things so that their children will ask questions. When they cross into the promised land the people are commanded to raise twelve stones, so that when future children ask why they are there the people can tell the story of God's love and deliverance to them. They are commanded to teach their children about the law, and make it public, literally wearing it and posting notices about it. There is a clear assumption that they will give time and effort to ensuring that their children grow up hearing, asking and challenging; a clear assumption to create a culture where children know nothing else other than the love of God.

I'm not going to say much more, because I think the applications should be obvious. We will learn what it is to follow Christ when we help children to do the same. To bless children is not to pat them on the head and send them away. It is to do all in our power not just to keep them from harm but to enable them to flourish. And if that means some noise in church, and bending our creaking knees to play with them on the floor, so be it. As Rowan Williams demonstrated, even the Prime Minister can wait when there are children to speak with.