

What can I do?

A sermon given on Sixteenth Sunday After Trinity, 19th September 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Online Attended Communion Service Mark 9:30-37

There's an old saying that the task of a preacher is to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable. It is quite a challenge, if, like me, you suspect that most of the time you are merely comforting the comfortable and disturbing the disturbed. But if the aim is to disturb a comfortable congregation, I have a much simpler suggestion. Instead of preaching, just introduce lots of children. Children are natural disturbers without even deliberately intending to be so. Whenever there are numbers of children in Church, not just this Church, any Church, just look at the arguments that break out: Are they too noisy; is their presence too distracting; should they go out or stay in; should we have them at the front or at the back; and always, why can't they be quiet like we were in Church when we were little? Maybe it was being forced to be quiet in Church as children that has made so many people decide not to keep coming to Church as adults. But where such arguments are going on, it's actually a healthy sign, because at least it means there are still children there, making their presence felt. The only Churches that don't argue about children are the ones where there aren't any.

But it isn't just the Church that finds the presence of children disturbing. Look at the way the whole culture of safeguarding has mushroomed over the last 20 years: there's a reason why it has mushroomed, as it has gradually come to light that for years and years our society has not actually been a very safe place for children. When the Independent Safeguarding Authority was set up twelve years or so back, it estimated that over 11 million adults, roughly a quarter of the adult population, would need to be checked before they could continue the job or the voluntary activity which brought them into contact with children. That does suggest a society profoundly ill at ease in its relationship with young people. I saw a cartoon once which showed a family celebrating their son's 18th birthday and the father was saying, "Congratulations, son, you're no longer a boy; you're now a suspected paedophile." And the anxiety is justified - every week there seems to be more stories about

teachers or sports coaches or Scout leaders, or, worst of all, priests who have abused their power over children.

So it is highly significant when Jesus takes a child, sets it in the middle of his disciples and says that the way his disciples treat children, the way they either welcome children or ignore them, is the litmus test of whether you will be first or last in the Kingdom. If you want to know who will be first in the Kingdom of God - if you want to see who really belongs there, look at the way people treat children: look at whether they can notice children and value them; look at whether they are willing to make space for children and accommodate them; look at whether they can still welcome children when the children are noisy and demanding and seeking attention and generally disturbing us.

Because the way we cope with children when they are difficult or disruptive will be a pretty good indicator of how we are likely to cope with anyone who is powerless and on the edge of society. If we can't cope for the excitement and spontaneity of children, how are we going to cope with those who are mentally ill or in the grip of an addiction, or who are disabled or who speak English as a second language, or who may be different from you and me in all sorts of other ways. Jesus seems to be saying that we shall be judged according to our willingness to welcome and make space for, and indeed be disturbed by, those who are powerless - those who, like children, may be unproductive, unpredictable, and uncomfortable.

Over the summer, the PCC has been looking at the evolving vision strategy for Beverley Minster, and we will be discussing it again tomorrow night when hopefully it will reach a point where we can share it more widely. And I hope this is something that will be a subject for considerable discussion and conversation around the congregation and the various stakeholders in the Minster. And there is a major emphasis in our vision on reaching those we currently don't, chiefly because we think that's the whole reason God has a Church here on Earth so that His love can be shared with the wider world, but also because reaching those we currently don't is the only way the Church is going to grow. And if we don't grow, we'll eventually wither away. So part of the proposed vision for the Minster is that we shall be known as a community where everyone is involved in inviting and welcoming and introducing people to Jesus and His community, including families and children and young people.

And the vision is that it's not just the clergy and staff who will be trying to invite and make space for people, but that it's actually something everyone takes seriously and shares responsibility for inviting and welcoming and making space for those who are not already part of this place. And that's something for all of us to ponder and to pray about.

Yes, of course, visitors get a welcome at the door, and we are now able to offer a cup of coffee at the end of the service. But what I'm talking about is something much deeper than that, a Church that is genuinely welcoming, and doesn't just like to think that about itself, is a Church that is willing to suffer a degree of inconvenience and disruption; where Church members invite newcomers into their homes; where they provide meals for people who have been bereaved or who are sick; where they offered to babysit for exhausted young parents; where there is a willingness to share our lives in order that others might know they truly belong.

In the passage, Jesus is challenging His disciples about how they welcome and make room for those whose presence might be inconvenient, because the fact is new people are inconvenient: they don't do things the same way as us old hands; they ask or good questions about what we do; they have ideas of their own; and they have no knowledge and probably no interest in our particular customs and culture. So I want to invite you to pray about this and to consider your own situation.

What can I do to make Beverley Minster a little bit more friendly, a little bit more inviting? Not that it isn't already, but there is always room for improvement. What can I do to befriend someone new, someone on the edge, someone who might not come back if they don't connect with one of us on a first visit? What can I do to help build community, to help shoulder someone else's burdens, to break down someone else's isolation, to include someone who is at risk of being left out.

The child whom Jesus takes and places in the midst of his disciples isn't just one individual child. He or she represents all of those who simply by being new or unknown, are potentially inconvenient and disruptive and are therefore at risk of being ignored. The Lord invites us to welcome them and make space for them. And if we can do that and offer ourselves with a servant heart, we shall be welcoming the Lord himself, and we shall be among those whom Jesus promises are first in the Kingdom of God.

Reading Text

Mark 9:30-37

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' ³² But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. ³³ Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' ³⁴ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' ³⁶ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'