

## **Jesus Loved Children** **Sermon on Mark 9: 33-37**

Sisters and brothers,  
we are all so used to the idea that Jesus loved children and was kind to them, aren't we? We've seen old-fashioned pictures of Jesus surrounded by children – my grandmother had one hanging over her bed...A white Jesus with long light brown hair dressed in a white robe sitting under trees that surely weren't olive trees but anything that grows around here, holding and blessing little children. Such images helped us have this image of Jesus being a nice guy doing the nice things. But in fact, what Jesus did then, was not just nice, it was revolutionary. It put the world of the first century Galilean upside down. In a moment I'll tell you why...

In the Gospels we find several sayings of Jesus about children. We know them well, and they don't generally strike us as being very extraordinary. Most of you know this sentence: "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them..." and so on. Jesus liked children and children were welcome where he was. Then there is this text in which Jesus tells the disciples that they must become "like children" in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:3). And the text of "whoever welcomes a child welcomes Christ..."

What did they all mean in Jesus' day?

What would Jesus' sayings about children have meant to the ordinary Galilean farm worker?

I believe that parents then loved their children as parents love their children now. But if you were born in the first century, it was much less certain than it is now, that you would grow up.

Many babies died in the first hours or weeks or years. This was simply the hard reality of life – as it is still the case in some of your home countries -, and people had to be unsentimental about it. For most people life was a pretty tough battle for survival.

And children in those days were not really allowed to be children. The best thing to do was to make it to adulthood as quickly as you could. The best chance of surviving was simply to become useful as soon as you could.

As far as the ancient world was concerned, childhood was not much more than an unfortunate wait until you reached the age when you could be useful. And this is still something of the reality today in cultures where poverty makes life hard and unsentimental.

Even in our culture we often see children being treated as nobodies who adults have the power over.

With his sayings about children Jesus was taking those who were nobodies in his time and putting them first. "If you welcome these, then you welcome God."

The things Jesus said about children go with all those things we know so well about the outcast, the destitute and the marginalized. Jesus stood with the nobodies of his day and said: "These are the ones God loves, these are the ones God is blessing; these are the ones you've got to be like."

In Jesus' time a kingdom of children is a kingdom of nobodies.

And remember that when Jesus was making the point about receiving children it was just after the disciples had been having their dispute about who was the greatest.

He is showing them how they've completely missed the point. They have got to become like nobodies if they are going to inherit the kingdom of God. The whole running after status and greatness is turned upside down in the kingdom of God.

So where would Jesus go today, if he wanted to say the very same thing to the people of our time and nation?

That is never a question we can safely answer. But just imagine for a moment that Jesus is walking around Munich. He goes with his disciples around the city. He visits the schools. He visits the churches. He passes the shops in the city centre with their designer clothes that cost a fortune. He visits the university, walks through the Englische Garten. And eventually at Münchner Freiheit he takes the U3 to Obersendling. And all the while, behind him, the disciples are having their conversation about which of them is the greatest.

Goodness knows what they thought the criteria for greatness were; public speaking, money making, attracting new disciples?

Jesus is on his final stop. He shuts the door and asks the disciples what they've been muttering about all the way round the tour. And they all fall silent.

Embarrassed? Guilty?

Jesus tells them that if they want to be first, they've got to make themselves last of all. And then he draws one of the people they are visiting into the middle of the room.

They are in a home for asylum seekers. And the woman he puts his arm around is well on in years. She has lost all she had: her home, her house, her husband – all in one night, when the government friendly soldiers had a go at the political opponents of their current dictator and wiped them all out. In that night her children had run away – she's never seen them again. Now she is here, she barely knows who she is. The shock sits deep. She can hardly talk. She cannot clarify her identity because she has no passport. She claims to be of a certain age, but nobody knows really because in her home country births weren't registered when she was born. She has no chance to stay and nowhere to go. She is nobody. She is frightened, doesn't trust anybody, but enjoys the hand on her arm offering nearness and warmth.

Jesus seems unbothered by the poverty of the place, by the dirt all around, and by the harshness of the guards who didn't really want to let him in. Jesus just wants to be with those who don't count, and lets us know: "Whoever welcomes a woman like this in my name, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me, but the one who sent me – God, my father."

I think there could be no better way of telling today's disciples that the kingdom of God is absolutely for those who are so often treated as nobodies in our times. The kingdom of God is once and forever marked by the value every single one of God's creatures is given – no matter how little they are regarded, or how much they are forgotten by those who hold the power in this world.

The kingdom of God is a different world! ...different from the kingdoms we know on earth.

And now back to our Gospel text about the children...

In Jesus' time children were nobodies in a way that, thank God, they aren't now. In Jesus' time no one would have thought of including children in church life which we are doing with Eloghosa today. In Jesus time you waited until you were adult enough to take part. And before then you didn't matter. In Jesus' time no one would have thought of trying to make childhood last longer or looking to children to teach us wisdom. Children then were simply adults in waiting. It would have felt as an insult for any adult to be compared to a child.

But Jesus valued those who were low in his time and he lifted them up. He brought them from the edges into the centre. He turned everything upside down.

Here at Peace Church today, we hear the Gospel new. And we may find it hard to hear at times. We may still want to argue about being the greatest, and we may still long for success and greatness and all that. This is all very human, sure.

But as we read the Gospel stories of Jesus we discover someone who turned the strife for greatness and success, and wealth and power upside down.

Jesus valued and cherished the nobodies of his time and asked his disciples to be with them.

Who are we to doubt that he would do the same in our time?

We may have different nobodies, we may be the nobodies, or feel as if we were.

We all may know times in our lives when we experienced what it means to be nobody: unimportant, not counting, forgotten, rejected, neglected, exploited, discriminated against and hurting... nobody.

Let us all together discover that the Gospel is for all people, that Jesus has come to all people, and that God's love also is for all people - and especially for those the world regards as nobodies.

Jesus takes us all into the centre and shows us that the kingdom of God is for us and that we are welcome! No matter who we are, or what anyone else says.

We are welcome, we are received warmly, we are given a home and a family.

That is the way in which nobodies become somebodies and start counting.

It happens through the love of God, nothing more and nothing less! Or should I say: as easy as that?!

The Jesus who received and welcomed the nobodies of his time, receives all of us in the name of God – regardless of who we are. And he invites us to find the nobodies of our time and place and be welcoming to them.

This won't make us popular with everyone. It won't make us a mass movement or a newspaper headline success story, but it will make us one with God and one with Christ who has come to turn the world upside down.

Christ has come to turn the world upside down:

to humble the powerful and to lift up the lowly.

Christ has come to turn the tables:

to topple vain idols and to stand with the poor.

Christ has come to proclaim God's kingdom:

to feed the hungry,  
to give sight to the blind,  
to strengthen the weary.  
to set the prisoners free.  
Christ has come to turn the world upside down:  
to overthrow the present order with a revolution of love.  
Amen.

### **Prayer**

We long for a time  
when the meek shall inherit the earth  
and all who hunger and thirst after justice  
shall be satisfied,  
and we believe that, despite the persistence of evil,  
now is always the time  
when more good can be done  
and we can make a difference.  
Amen.