

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 18 September 2021

*Lord God, help us turn our hearts to you and hear what you will speak, for you speak peace to your people through Christ, our Lord. Amen*

Mark 9:30-37

### ***Welcoming children in his name***

Whenever we see or hear about children, what comes first to our minds? In verses 30-37, Jesus reveals that he will suffer, die and rise; disciples are embarrassed at being caught in a power struggle. Lastly, a child is introduced as the model for discipleship. Our focus today is children who are not only the model for discipleship but citizens of the kingdom of God. Children are also a living reminder of the purpose of the church in the world.

### ***Children and discipleship***

One aspect of discipleship is the total dependence on God as if children depend on their parents until they become grown-ups. In today's passage, Jesus foretells the disciples about his death and resurrection again. They don't understand the saying, but they are afraid to ask him.<sup>1</sup> Here two things are in view. One is that even though Jesus speaks plainly, they do not understand. There is such a great gulf between their expectations and Jesus' predictions. Without the help of the Holy Spirit, they won't be able to understand it. The other is, they are afraid even to ask for clarification. Spiritually, the disciples are still at the infant stage, and all they can do is judge things according to worldly standards. Asking questions can also be looked foolish as it may reveal their ignorance of the topic. In addition, understanding the prediction of the death of the Messiah may be the most absurd thing for them to hear. Throughout Mark's Gospel, the disciples remain at about the same level of understanding. Acknowledging our ignorance and asking questions to God in good faith is a way to become children in the kingdom of God. God will not rebuke us but answer our questions even though the questions look foolish and trivial. The cross is an object lesson for the disciples that symbolizes self-emptying, love, humility, total dependence on God. Jesus died as the child of God. He obeyed and depended on God entirely. It is also important to understand the next topic – children and the kingdom of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 9:32

### *Children and the kingdom of God*

“He took a little child and put it among them.”<sup>2</sup> We could see this child as another object lesson. When Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me,”<sup>3</sup> he links the child to himself and God, thereby establishing a link between the child and God. The person who welcomes a child gets credit for welcoming Jesus, and s/he gets credit for welcoming God. By extension, then, the person who welcomes a child gets credit for welcoming God. At verse 10:15, Jesus will call the disciples to “receive the Kingdom of God like a little child,” but here (9:37), he calls the disciples to welcome children as they would welcome Jesus or God.

Jesus is also talking about children’s helpless dependence. So welcoming children in our midst is crucial work to do in God’s kingdom. Here children/a child is also a symbol for anyone in need, helpless, or of lowly status. Verses 42-47 will tell us that “little ones who believe in me” - people of any age who are nevertheless immature in faith - are also included. Jesus is calling us to welcome the homeless, the disabled, the mentally ill, the sick, the uneducated, and anyone else who cannot repay our hospitality or make it “worth our while.” It is because every child who is born into the kingdom of God, they enter it as those for whom everything must be done by the mature. In God's kingdom, the full dynamics of welcoming, growing, healing, comforting are happening simultaneously.

Helplessness fosters humility. Jesus says: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, Jesus’ words must be disturbing to the disciples because, in that time and place, children have so little status - ranking somewhere between women and slaves. Children spend their time in the care of women. In the present time, we may expect our children to grow into adults and to engage in a life of fulfilled dreams. But this was not the case for children of Jesus’ time. More than half of the children born at this time never reached puberty. They died of diseases and malnutrition. As such, for a rabbi to take a child in his arms in the presence of his disciples and say to them to become like children is remarkable.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 9:36a

<sup>3</sup> Mark 9:37

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 18:3-4

### ***Children and the church***

In our story time, we heard a story titled *Tarore and Her book*. Tarore was Ngati Haua, a Māori iwi of the eastern Waikato, as part of the Tainui confederation. Tarore attended the mission school run by Alfred and Charlotte Brown. She was such a good student that the Browns gave her the Gospel of Luke. She wore this precious taonga in a kete around her neck. The question was why you think she did it so. It is easily answered since Tarore thought of the Gospel of Luke as treasure (taonga). As we hear the story, we can't help but think about questions that begin with 'what if...'. What if the mission school didn't have to move to Tauranga; what if they were not attacked by a raiding party from Te Arawa; what if they didn't kill Tarore; what if the Browns didn't give her the Gospel of Luke...the list can go on. But Tarore was killed; the raiding party took the Gospel of Luke in Te Reo Maori; the book had words of peace for all people, and the warrior who had killed Tarore read the book with its message of peace – 'Love your enemies.'

This book reminds us of Jesus' saying about his death in v31: "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." The word 'be betrayed' is *paradidomi* (to deliver/to deliver over)<sup>5</sup> in Greek, which scholars refer to as a 'divine passive.' It means that God is behind the handing over according to the will of God. In short, there was a godly purpose to be served by Jesus being delivered up to his enemies, and God is the one in charge here. We see a similar element in the story of *Tarore and her book*. She loved the Gospel of Luke and regarded it as treasure. And then she lost her life, but the Gospel of Luke survived. The good news was spread to other regions and made people forgive their enemies and seek forgiveness from the victim's family. It brought peace to them. All things mentioned before can happen in the church because it is a branch of God's kingdom on earth. We as the church exist not because we are perfect and full of resources, but because of the spirit of God in Christ who is our head and we the body. Indeed, we want to see many more children in our midst because they are the living reminders of what discipleship, the kingdom of God, and the church are about. We will welcome children today and always. Amen!

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<sup>5</sup> Paul uses this same word, *paradidomi*, to speak of Jesus being "delivered up for our trespasses, and ...raised for our justification" (Romans 4:25; see also Romans 8:32).