

Sunday 24th September 2006. Proper 20 Trinity 15

St Mary's

“Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

In popular spirituality, Jesus' love of children is well known. It is rooted not only in that verse from this morning's gospel but also later in Mark's gospel when parents brought their children to Jesus for him to bless them. The disciples tried to shoo them away but Jesus wasn't having it. “Let the children come to me,” he said, “do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

In response to this, sermons will often exhort us, perhaps with a measure of idealism, to become like children with their happy innocence. The words of Michel Quoist from “Prayers of Life” on the front page of the bulletin are rather in this vein.

"God says: I like youngsters. I want people to be like them.

I like little children because my likeness has not been dulled in them.

I like them because they are still growing, they are still improving.

I like youngsters because they are still struggling...they know that they sin, and they say so, and they try not to sin any more...

But above all, I like youngsters because of the look in their eyes. In their eyes I can read their age.

Hurry! I am ready to give you again the beautiful eyes of a child...”

Sometimes then we take the child in Jesus’ teaching as a symbol, representing how we ourselves might be as adults. But there is more to it than that. For the Jesus of Mark the child is not just a symbol. The child is also a person.

Perhaps we don’t find that too hard to grasp. After all, we have come a long way in our understanding of psychology in the last century. We take it more for granted that a child is a person.

Yet Jesus’ attitude to children in his day would have been deeply shocking to his first hearers. See how his disciples wanted to turn the children away. For children in first century Palestine were non-entities. They had no status. They had no rights. Early training was harshly disciplined. Not until early adulthood would a young person begin to be taken seriously within the family.

So for Jesus to take a child, to place it in the midst of the crowd and to put his arms around it was revolutionary. He was saying: “This child, however much you think it may be disregarded, is a person, and as a person has a special place in the kingdom of God.” Such radical action was all of a piece with his attitude to others who were marginalised: the foreigner, the leper, the madman, the shepherd, the quisling, the widow.

What Jesus did for these people, he did for children. He rescued them from the margins of society and placed them in the very centre of the new community.

Is that the message we give in this place? That children are central to our life? Hardly. We give them a special corner – but it is in the farthest recess of the building. For most of the time they are banished from the wonders of worship in this place to the tawdriness of the church hall. If they are in church here with us, we find it hard not to keep shushing them. This morning's gospel is a sharp reminder of the challenge we face as a congregation to find ways of welcoming children into our very midst – with all their disturbing ways.

We are not chiefly concerned to have children in our midst because we have one eye on the future: we are getting old and we need a new generation to take our place. That is true but it is not why we want children with us. No. We want children with us because as a Christian community we are a microcosm of God's kingdom. And God's kingdom is open to all people – children included.

Have you noticed how as adults we are for ever wanting to dominate our children? They are, after all, completely dependent on us – for food and shelter, for warmth and affection. So when children are manipulated or abused by the adults in their lives, even the well-meaning adults like their parents and their teachers, there are few ways the children can readily express their anger

and frustration. That has to wait until they are older. And when their anger and frustration does burst out, it is often aimed elsewhere than at those who have been its cause.

We have heard a good deal in the media recently about violence in the lives of young people. Gun crime in particular features in the news. Although incidents involving guns make up less than one per cent of all crimes, the number of reported offences has been growing steadily over the past few years. Much of this is because of an increase in the use of imitation guns. There has also been a sharp increase in the number of young people who say they carry real or fake handguns, supposedly to protect themselves.

And then there's the knife culture. Earlier in the summer there was a nationwide knife amnesty as part of a campaign to stop people carrying knives, because of the risk that the weapon could be used against the carrier. Tackling knife culture, the Home Office has declared, especially among young people, is paramount to the safety of our communities. Evidence suggests that the most likely group to carry knives are 15 and 16 year-old boys. It was from just that group that arrests were made last month in connection with the murder in Grovehill.

Now I am not suggesting that there are any easy answers to the questions posed by violence among young people in our society. But I am saying that at least in part such violence is due to

our failure as a society to treat children as people.

And I am also saying that that is what we in our Christian communities – microcosms of God's kingdom - are called above all else to do – to treat people, children included, as people. “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name,” said Jesus, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.”