

Sermon preached by The Rev'd Glenn Maytum

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

At the church where I grew up there was a painting hanging on the wall of the Sunday School hall, where Jesus is sitting with a child on His knee, and others watching on. You probably know it the one I mean: there are many versions. There is one on the front of today's pewsheet.

Today's Gospel reading made me remember that scene and whether I had really looked at it, or even really thought about the reading? We have all heard it so many times.

What do you see in Mark 9? You would be influenced by your past experiences or even one of the pictures I mentioned.

The Gospel scene includes Jesus' mates STILL arguing about greatness: all the way back to Headquarters in Capernaum. You will remember last week's readings were all about God's view of greatness, the futility of self-seeking, an upside-down/back -to-front view. A paradox. And, today's story builds on that.

Today, we see Jesus pick up a child to clearly announce that greatness is NOT found where they think it is, So, here's the story: Jesus picks up a clean, well-clothed, happy, smiling, angelic, hair-combed, cute child. Doesn't He?

Well, that's what I remember from the picture on the wall. But, Jesus did not pick up the child just because it was cute. Once again, as so many times in this interesting Gospel of Mark, Jesus was being counter-cultural. His actions were subversive.

He picked up a CHILD.

Now, our views of how children should be treated are FAR different from what happened in Jesus' time, or, for that matter, from what was the "norm" (so to speak) until relatively recently. Were you brought up in a "Children should be seen and not heard" environment?

I think it is fair to say that children, in our society, have become the centre of attention. Reflect on how we have been reacting about kids learning from home; or, the effects of lack of preparation for the HSC; or, which age groups can be vaccinated; all VERY important!

We remember from history and literature about stories of children like Dickens' Oliver Twist and how they lived. Or, how did you react when you watched the film LION and the little boy was left all alone at the railway station?

In Jesus' time Hebrews became slaves through poverty or debt and young girls could be sold by their parents to be maid-servants in order to pay off a debt.

In Jesus' time, all privilege and power and authority were vested in MEN.

When, in verse 35, Jesus says "servant", He uses the Greek work which can be translated as both servant or slave, which I think is important in this story.

Unlike our society, children led very precarious lives. Children had no rights. And, as this story says, they were in Capernaum. What were they doing there? Wandering the streets? Orphans? Dispossessed? Begging for food or coins? Pickpocketing?

They were quite likely to be street children: there, but "unseen," unnoticed, living on their wits, with snotty noses, probably wearing ill-fitting, unwashed smelly clothing, hair full of lice and dirty, bare feet.

This is not the picture we imagine or see painted. By picking up this child, Jesus was affronting power and the egos of His status-seeking disciples.

Once again, Jesus uses PARADOX to highlight His ideas: and this child is a clear illustration of a vulnerable person.

Because, this story is NOT about children.

Jesus welcomes the vulnerable person, of any age, in any age, offering acceptance and protection. Rather than the obvious, well-known person or celebrity, Jesus includes the "least ones"; the ones without glamour or fashion or appeal or status or money or power. Jesus includes the ones easily missed.

No wonder it says in verse 34 the disciples went QUIET! They did not comprehend and, like most of us do when we hear something that initially makes no sense to us, they remained SILENT.

Jesus challenged the disciples and, consequently, you and I, to the service of the poor and needy. Do we not try to be the "greatest" even in small things? Does our pride and ego sometimes get in the way of following Jesus? This child was a stand-in for Jesus, Himself.

Once again, it's all about RELATIONSHIPS. This is certainly a recurring theme. But, the disciples in any age don't seem to get it. Jesus shows His disinterest with rules and status and wealth and big egos and uses a little person to highlight His interest in relationships.

Commentators notes that Jesus explains that the way to a mature understanding of one's self is through selfless servanthood. And, that those who have this servanthood see God in the faces of those they serve. And they, like Jesus, transform the world by their witness to justice, peace and service to others.

As today's reading, in verse 37, concludes: whoever builds relationships with the vulnerable in any society builds their relationship with the One sent by God and, ultimately, God.

Years ago, I think I was at an RE inservice day, I was told the story of a very old Jewish Rabbi who used to stand, daily, as hundreds came to him for a blessing, or advice; and he was asked how he could do it for so long without becoming weary?

He answered: "When you are counting diamonds, you don't get tired".

Actually seeing all people as precious diamonds changes one's outlook, because they could just as easily be regarded as stones.

Amen.