

Jesus and the little children

As a child one of my favourite films was a John Wayne Cowboy movie called The Cowboys.

With all his cowhands heading off to dig for gold John Wayne is left with a herd of cattle to take to market 400 miles away and in desperation hires the boys from the local school. The adventures start there.

The film is made all the better by Bruce Dern who plays a deliciously evil villain. I remember wanting to be one of those cowboys and like the boys in the story have dangerous adventures that turn out alright in the end.

Literature and films are full of stories where children overcome the odds to bring about a happy ending.

The Narnia stories by C.S.Lewis have children going from our world to Narnia to resolve the problems.

Harry Potter is the boy who overcomes He who must not be named.

Danny is champion of the world in a Rohl Dahl story.

Our Old Testament story today gives permission for authors everywhere to let children be the heroes although Samuel has no expectation for what his life will become; he was the last prophet to lead the people of Israel before the first of Israel's kings.

Samuel has to be taught how to respond to God but we should note that God has chosen a child to be the means of his proclamation.

Children were regarded as non-persons. They had no status, no authority, no power or influence. They were equated with the very least of the servants and the lowest servant would be the one serving meals and clearing away and who ate the leftovers as their portion.

The boy Samuel sleeps on a mat in the temple and carries out the lowliest of tasks.

Thinking about his lowly status reminded me of another story, this time a Disney cartoon from 1963 "The Sword in the Stone". Arthur, who of course draws the sword and becomes the King (one of our mythical legends) is known throughout the film as Wart, a suitably dismissive name for a lowly boy acting as a squire.

We often focus on the story of Samuel to highlight how God calls his people into acts of service, ministries of all kinds.

*Here I am Lord,
Is it I Lord,
I have heard you calling in the night.*

On this occasion though it is the fact God is calling a child that is the point. Why a child?

Because he is innocent? (Eli's sons were rogues)
Because he is trusting? Children have an astonishing capacity for trust.

Is it because, even though he is so young, his heart is already completely given to God, like David the Shepherd who became the greatest King?

Jesus and the little children

Whatever the reasons, God chooses a child and the bible draws an interesting parallel between Samuel and Jesus.

Of Samuel it says...and the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and favour with the Lord and with men.
1 Samuel 2:26

Of Jesus it says... and Jesus grew in Wisdom and stature and in favour with God and men.
Luke 2:52.

Luke is clearly recalling the great prophet Samuel to suggest that Jesus like Samuel was called at a tender age.

But that didn't change the prevailing culture that regarded children as non-persons.

In a couple of places Jesus does the unexpected and places a high value on children and being like children.

The Disciples don't want the mothers and children bothering Jesus. Why should he give his attention to those of no consequence?

But of course Jesus was always giving his attention to people of no consequence. He was always with the wrong crowd and his stories were about the wrong crowd getting into God's Kingdom

Jesus is glad to bless the children, he said that the Kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these? It's not the first time he said something like this.

There are two similar stories in Mark and Matthew.

In Matthew 18 the disciples approach Jesus and ask "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven"

In Mark 9 the disciples have been arguing between themselves about who is the greatest.

It could be the same story told different ways.

The answer is the same. Jesus takes a child and says, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

What does that mean?

Jesus said "whoever humbles themselves like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven".

So humility is the key. Allowing oneself to be the servant of others. Not regrading status and power and authority as of any consequence.

It ties in with other statements about the first being the last and the last being the first.

Following Jesus is not a route to fame and glory and if it should unfortunately come along it is to be treated warily and with little regard.

When clergy are ordained their first year is as a deacon. In the biblical sense the deaconate are the servants, they do the humble tasks.

Later the deacons are ordained priests, which in Anglican theology means they can pronounce absolution, blessing and consecrate at the Eucharist.

Jesus and the little children

Some go on to higher office and become Bishops.

But a saying is used frequently...particularly when clergy are wont to moan about the tasks they have to do.

Once a deacon, always a deacon.

I'm reminded of the lyrics of a simple prayer song.

Make me a servant

Humble and meek

Lord let me lift up

Those who are weak

And may the prayer

Of my heart always be

Make me a servant

Make me a servant

Make me a servant today.

But there's another aspect to what Jesus was saying – tell me if you agree or not.

Children have the capacity for a simple faith which gets clouded and lost as adulthood comes along.

Let's face it – they can believe in the man in a red suite who enters the house down a non-existent chimney with gifts. They believe in a weird being who collects teeth from under the pillow and leaves money. In the Peanuts cartoons Linus believes in the great Pumpkin and misses out on trick and treat as a result.

Are we to have THAT kind of blind faith?

As adults, the big questions of life and death and suffering and the nature of God can erode faith or leave us unable to say exactly what it is we believe. Puzzling

over miracles, trying to work out if God gets angry or not, being not sure what to make of bible stories and belief in resurrection can feel foolish. It can make us feel ...childish.

But we should be unashamed to retain a clear simple faith.

The Theologian Karl Barth was asked on a visit to the States what the most important thing in his faith. He answered in the words of a children's song.

Jesus loves me this I know, for the bible tells me so.

And a former Bishop of Durham, the controversial David Jenkin led a retreat I attended. As an academic he questioned all manner of things such as the virgin birth and resurrection and so on, but on the Sunday morning as he preached he said There is much that puzzles me and much I question. But one thing I know with certainty. God loves me.

Child-like faith is a faith that trusts in the love of God seen most explicitly in the life of Jesus Christ.

And child-like faith embraces humility and accepts that to take up our cross and follow Jesus is unlikely to lead to fame glory and an easy life.

Child-like faith is the doorway through which lies the kingdom of heaven and that's where the real adventures are to be found.