

**Proper 20, Year B**

**Mark 9.30-37**

**St Luke's, Chelsea**

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[A]nd taking it in his arms, [Jesus] said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me'.

May I speak...

Cast your mind back to being a child. That might be a very recent experience, or rather longer ago. And as you do so, I'd invite you to bring to mind a time that you felt welcomed. Perhaps it is a memory of school; or nursery; or of going to a friend's house; or of being at a relative's; or of life at home. Perhaps it is hard to think of one – and that is surely a good sign, if the experience of being welcomed was your usual one, forming you with the sense that this is simply how the world works. But as you consider that moment of welcome, it is surely the emotions that stick in the mind. Perhaps it is a feeling of safety. Perhaps it is one of being loved, of someone expressed joy that you were here. Perhaps it is feeling secure to play, or to wonder, or to explore. Perhaps it is a feeling of being listened to. Perhaps it is a jumbled combination of all of them – a general sense of well-being.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells his surely surprised disciples to welcome others like they would welcome a child. And I think it is worth our while today dwelling on what that welcome means – and what it feels like. That's in part, as I shall come to, because I think it helps us to consider what good adulthood looks like. But it is also because we have in recent decades been very uncertain about the role that we expect children to play in our society.

It's that uncertainty we do well to consider first. In a book published about twenty years ago, Rowan Williams pointed to an issue in how we Western adults consider childhood. We have been tempted, he said, to forget the importance of play. Play is, in a basic sense, activity without any purpose beyond simply the doing and enjoying of the activity. It might be very light-hearted, like the screams of delight we hear each day from our churchyard playground. Or play might be rather darker, like children playing around themes of death and violence. Either way, play is how we make sense of the world. And as children, we need that space to play: to learn what it is to be in

control, but also to be confident that the adults will protect us from the worst consequences of what we might do.

Reflecting on Williams's comment, perhaps I might offer one example from the last week. In preparation for our forthcoming child, on Monday my wife and I toured a local nursery. The assistant giving us the tour talked a great deal about child development, about the curriculum each age would follow, about the regular reports we would receive of our child's new accomplishments and things they had learned. These were the parts of the nursery that were foregrounded, that we were expected to value. Doubtless it is also a nursery whose staff care deeply for their children, where there is a great deal of laughter, and where children feel welcomed. But the message we heard was: these things are secondary. There is learning to be done.

This sense that childhood is a time of preparation for adulthood is surely a great loss. Where is the time to stare at a woodlouse, watching it move slowly across a log? Where is the space to be bored, and to learn how to deal with those feelings of boredom and frustration? When are the occasions to be treated as an individual, less an empty vessel to be filled than someone with whom a relationship is to be built?

And this approach to childhood is also indicative of our attitude to adulthood. For we are tempted to see play as a children's activity, mere preparation for the adult work of doing and achieving. If adult life has come to be defined at times by the ability to exercise our own free will, then the task of childhood becomes one of helping children learn as quickly as possible to exercise that will – politically, economically, sexually. Working-age adult life becomes the fullness of human existence: childhood, and old age, are in this view moments of lesser humanity. It is no surprise that Rowan Williams's book was called *Lost Icons*: the loss of childhood being one of those icons of the fullness of human life that we have lost sight of in our celebration of adult activity and self-determination.

So we do well to enjoy children; to listen to them; to cherish them for who they are rather than just what they might become. It is something that I am sure our Sunday School leaders are doing at the moment. And I enjoy the opportunity at various points in the week, though perhaps particularly when I go to read Bible stories to the 4 year olds at Christ Church school. As one mother reported to me after this week's reading, when we heard of God's creation of the world: 'he said you wore black and white. And that we learnt about the good bit of the Bible, and next week will do the bad bit.' That's one way to prepare for the Fall! Or, as one child last year piped up, when asked how God might enjoy the world: 'God sits there, drinking hot chocolate with

marshmallows!' Indeed. What joy to spend unhurried time, wondering at our marvellous, mysterious world, playing with how to describe the most unfathomable aspects of reality with which we have a whole life to grapple. These are the things we can do, like Adam and Eve enjoying the Garden of Eden, or Jesus taking the time to pray in the face of the world's many demands. We can be the silent revolutionaries for the things that are eternal, in the face of a way of life around us that often has more immediate concerns on its mind.

We are to welcome the little children, says Jesus. We are to do so in his name, in the name of the one who gave himself to death in the face of evil humanity, and yet rose again. For how we welcome that child – or indeed all around us who are in need of love, protection and care – is a measure of how we welcome Christ. In performing this welcome, we are truly becoming a servant of all. And it is then – and not in power, achievement or fame – that we may one day be called first in the kingdom.