

Sunday 15th November 2015
Matt 18:1-6 Mark 13:1-8 Daniel 12:1-3

PRAY

Don't know if you watched Children in Need on Friday night where another new and incredible record total of £37m was raised through generous donations in order to help children across our country get help and support
Or if you caught the news of the horrific attacks in Paris which left 129 people dead and over 350 injured
Or if like me, you caught up with both these events yesterday morning
Strangely I think that our readings today have something to say to both of these headlines

Living today we are caught up in the cross roads where both the purposes of God and the pain of the world cross paths
We live after Jesus death and resurrection where He defeated the powers of darkness by dying on the cross and then being raised to life 3 days later
But we also live before He returns to earth a second time when the hope and promise of the complete fulfilment of all He has done will come into being

In the Matthew reading Jesus is telling His friends, the disciples, more about the Kingdom of heaven.
He warns them, and those who have heard these words afterwards, that there is a condition to being part of the Kingdom of heaven. He tells us here that *'unless we change and become like little children we will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.'*

The Daniel reading is talking about the end times and warns us that *'there will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then'*
As we look around our world today we may think that things cannot get any worse.
We might wonder if Jesus is about to return again and bring the final end to pain and suffering
Jesus tells His disciples in the Mark passage that there will be wars, nations fighting against nation and kingdom against kingdom. He says that there will be earthquakes and famines as the end times approach

We can wonder and we can speculate

Who knows... maybe the end times are approaching
But I don't want to speculate on that because at the beginning of Acts we are told that no one knows the time or place when Jesus will return to complete His work.
ONLY God knows

What I do want to do though is share the hope that Jesus gives us.... the hope that, because of what Jesus did for us, we can have a place in His Kingdom

Because of His love and grace, we can be delivered as the reading in Daniel promises.

As Maggie and Joe and Theo's God parents will declare in a few minutes time
We can choose to repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour
We can choose to turn to Christ as Saviour, submit to Christ as Lord and come to Christ
as the way, the truth, and the life
And be welcomed in to God's Kingdom here and now and for all eternity.

And to do this well, to do this completely, Jesus says that we need to become like little children. He told Nicodemus that we need to be born again.
When we look at Theo we see a weak and vulnerable baby
A little boy who is dependent upon Maggie and Joe to feed him, protect him, care for him
We see a trust within him, an intuition that his parents will do the best for him
Children have an incredible innate sense of who and what is safe for them and who they can trust and rely upon

Children are inquisitive. How many of us have spent time with 3 year olds who respond to every sentence with WHY? !!
And they want real answers, not be fobbed off with half answers

Children have an enormous amount of love to give and receive love without question

And Jesus says we need to change and become like these children if we are to enter the Kingdom of Heaven
Why?

Because children, in all their innocence and trust and love and humility are the clearest sign of God's Kingdom. It is not a Kingdom where survival of the fittest is the key factor. Or academic qualifications, or money, or athletic prowess or... But where gentleness, and faith, and submission are the keys

How good are we at learning from the children around us?
Let's try looking at the world as children do
Let's try replicating those characteristics of children that will help our faith in Jesus grow so that we can change and be changed and have a place in the Kingdom of heaven

But Jesus' teaching does not end there
It is not just acknowledging that children can teach us good things and changing to become like them
Jesus also tells us that children are precious in their own right and *'whoever welcome one such child in my name welcomes me'*

I wonder how much we really value our children?
How much we really welcome them?

10/15 years ago, maybe more there was a real move in churches to employ youth workers

The thinking in many of those churches was, I suspect, if we employ a youth worker, we will get more young people to church and then the church won't die!

Now I am NOT saying there is anything wrong with employing youth workers, or children's workers. They are fantastic people who often serve sacrificially

But they are not the miracle cure for declining, ageing church congregations!

I do think that there is a subtle trap that we can fall in to and must be very careful about

I think there is a real but subtle difference between

- wanting to have children and young people in our church because we believe they are the future and if they are part of our church our church will not die out Self-preservation??
- and loving and valuing and believing that children and young people are part of the church, and God's Kingdom just as they are at the age of 3 or 5 or 12 or..... not just a possible means of survival for the future church

Jesus was being completely counter cultural when he called the little child to him and placed that child in the midst of all the adults

Children at that time were considered totally insignificant, almost half human until they reached puberty and could be useful to society

And here was Jesus, noticing, acknowledging and holding up as an example, a young child

And then saying that whoever welcomed the child, as a child, as a precious person in their own right, was actually welcoming Him

You see, when we give children time and space, and really listen to them, we see them as real people there and then, not just potential for the future

Their prayers can be so powerful and spot on.... because they often see life with less complications than us adults

They can hear from God in amazing ways.... because of their less complicated faith and acceptance

They have insights to life and ways of giving to others that we as adults don't always have

So as well as being able to teach us many things, we must remember that they are precious here and now.

CS Lewis said

'Children are not a distraction from more important work.

They ARE the most important work.'

As we baptise Theo in a few moments time, into the body of Christ

And as we journey together in the months and years ahead

May we always not just learn from the children amongst us.

But welcome them and do all we can to embrace them and their faith and do nothing that will hinder them or cause them to stumble Because Jesus warns us that if anyone causes a little one to stumble, then we may as well have a large stone around our neck and drown in the sea.

That is an incredible warning.

Far more serious than the warnings that Jesus gave to those who steal - cut off your hand
Or commit adultery - cut out your eye that makes you sin

The warning from Jesus is serious

But the promise is fantastic

If we welcome the little children, then we welcome Him

It is difficult living in that place where the roads cross

Where the pain of the world is evident every day as we hear or read the news

Where we need to give to charities like Children in Need in order that children and young people can receive the love and support they need

Where children are not always welcomed as precious human beings

Where people rage havoc in a city on a Friday night and then kill themselves

But we have a hope and an assurance from a loving God

That He is working His purposes out and one day His work will be complete

And those of us who chose to follow His path

And chose to become like little children

Will have a place in His Kingdom, for all eternity. :-)