Come to Jesus like a little child

Text: Mark 10:13-16

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**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Genesis 17:1-10; Mark 10:13-16

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 432, 103b, 131, 468, 523

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#32)

**Theme:**  Jesus welcomes little children and blesses them, teaching that the kingdom of God belongs to those who are like little children.

**Proposition:**  To enter the Kingdom of God you must humbly trust Jesus, like a little child.

**Introduction**

How do you feel when you hear a young child in the worship service making a noise or moving around? sad? glad? irritated? What do you think of very young children, infants or toddlers? Adorable? Endearing? Precious? Vulnerable? Needy? Or perhaps at times noisy, distracting, or very labour intensive for their carers? When we hear children making noises or moving around during our worship services, what we think about small children, certainly in this church situation, comes to the forefront of our minds.

In our text from Mark’s gospel today we see what some different kinds of people think about small children. Mark writes: *People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them.* (Mark 10:13). Some people, likely parents, thought their children of sufficient value and importance to bring them to Jesus for a blessing. Others – the disciples – thought these children not to be worthy of the attention and ministry of Jesus. Perhaps they imagined that Christ was already too busy with needy men and women to be bothered with children. Perhaps they thought that children did not have needs that Jesus came to meet.

What we do know is that in the 1st century Roman empire, children were often treated with contempt and viewed merely as property; being valued not for who they were, but for what they could contribute to the family business. Back then there was widespread child abandonment, abuse and murder of infants. Whilst many things have changed over the past 2,000 years, child abuse sadly remains as a widespread national and international sin. This is reflected in our own country where a law is now necessary to ensure that any organization providing services to children must have a child protection policy in place.

In contrast, both to some in contemporary New Zealand and in 1st century society and also in contrast to the attitude of his disciples, Jesus welcomes little children and, in the process, shows all who hear him the way to come into the Kingdom of God. As we look at this text of Scripture this morning, we’ll do so under three headings:

1. Kingdom children
2. Trusting children
3. Blessed children
4. **Kingdom Children (v13-14)**

Imagine some zealous member of this congregation standing at the door reprimanding any parents who try to bring a young child into the auditorium. They might say something like “*Infants and toddlers have no place in the worship service, they can’t understand anything that is said, and they can be sooo disruptive*”. Mark, together with Matthew (19:13-15) and Luke (18:15-17) in their parallel accounts, record that the disciples of Jesus rebuked those who were bringing children to Jesus that He might touch them. The word that Luke uses to describe these very young people means a ‘new-born’ and is rendered ‘babies’ or ‘infants’ in our English translations. Mark and Matthew use a broader term for children of any age, so it is possible that there were both infants and older children who were brought to Jesus that day.

Mark writes that Jesus was indignant about what the disciples were doing. This is a strong word which means ‘*to be oppressed in mind, to be grieved about what is wrong*’. Jesus was righteously angry that his disciples would presume to exclude young children from His presence. He said ‘"*Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God*” (v14). We should not be surprised that Jesus welcomed children of any and every age. He never refused anyone who came to Him. Not the paralytic who was lowered on his bed to be with Jesus (Mark 2:1-12). Not lepers, tax-collectors, women, the blind, prostitutes, not the poor nor the rich (as we’ll see in the next passage in Mark’s gospel).

Jesus says to **everyone** who knows they are needy and will listen “*Come to me,* ***all*** *who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*” (Matt 11:28). Jesus confirms that not one of those He died for will fail to come to Him saying “***All*** *that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out*” (John 6:37). We began this service with hymn 432 ‘Come, ye sinners’: “*Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched, weak and wounded, sick and sore, Jesus ready stands to save you*”. Little children, youth, middle-aged, elderly…have you come to Jesus?

Jesus said in our text: ‘"*Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God*” (v14). Let’s think now about the concept of a kingdom. New Zealand is not a kingdom as such, although as a constitutional monarchy we do have a king, the recently crowned Charles III, who together with the House of Representatives makes up the Parliament of our country. Many of us here today are citizens of New Zealand, although some have the status of ‘permanent residents’ or may be here on visitors, student, or work visas. For those of us who are New Zealanders, this is **our** country**, our** nation, we are ruled by **our** government, we are required to pay **our** taxes! We also receive benefits as citizens – we can legally live in this land permanently – as long as we are alive in these bodies! As Kiwis, as New Zealanders, we belong here!

There are some parallels here to the ‘Kingdom of God’. (The term ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ which we find in the Bible is interchangeable with ‘Kingdom of God’). Those who are part of this Kingdom are citizens who belong. This Kingdom is ruled by an appointed King – Jesus Christ - to whom God the Father has given all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18)

Now let’s see what Jesus says about children and the Kingdom of God. He declares that: “the *kingdom of God* ***belongs*** *to such as these”.* The word translated ‘belongs’ literally reads in the original language as ‘is’. The word translated ‘to such as’ means ‘of such a kind as’. Putting this all together, Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God is located in, present in, evidenced by, very young children, like those who were being brought to Him. Characteristically, Christ coveys a wealth of truth in a few words. Children are part of the Kingdom of God, therefore they are of high value and significance, not only because they are (as we all are) made in the image of God, but also because even the youngest of children may be included in the Kingdom of God.

Notice that Jesus does **not** say ‘*the kingdom of God belongs to these children that are being brought to me*’. Jesus is **not** teaching that **all** children, perhaps before some ‘age of accountability’ are automatically part of the Kingdom of God. Neither is Jesus declaring that all the particular individual children brought to Him on that day were part of the Kingdom of God. Jesus is teaching that there are very young children, of the same ‘type’ or ‘kind’ as those being brought to Him who are part of the Kingdom of God.

Very young children are conceived, as we all are, in sin (Ps 51:5) so that we are not sinners because we sin, but rather we sin because we are naturally sinners. Are young children often cute? Yes! Sometimes adorable? Absolutely! Precious and loveable? Most certainly! Yet very young children clearly demonstrate that they are the centre of their own world, selfish by nature, demanding, and not needing to be taught by anyone how to rebel. How, you might well ask, can an infant who cannot understand that they are a sinner both by nature and by choice respond to the gospel call to repent and believe in Christ be part of the Kingdom of God? The short answer is that they cannot respond. Actually none of us can apart from God’s regenerating grace.

First and foremost, entrance into the Kingdom of God is **not** fundamentally the choice of an individual sinner. Jesus explained this profound truth to Nicodemus: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*” (John 3:5). Today the kingdom of God is seen in the lives of those who love King Jesus, young and old who are children of God (John 1:12), which brings us to our second point.

1. **Trusting Children (v15)**

I remember as a much younger father throwing one of my infant children up in the air and waiting for them to go high above my head before coming back down into my waiting arms. No fear, no anxiety, no doubt in the laughing squealing face of my airborne child, just completely trusting assurance that I would be there for them. Precious memories. Children are naturally trusting of those they know love them. Mistrust and doubt only come as we age and experience the harsh realities of a fallen world where not everyone is trustworthy and reliable all the time. There is something about being childlike that necessary for our wellbeing as humans, as Jesus teaches when He says: “*Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God* ***like*** *a child shall not enter it*” (v15).

What is it about being childlike that is absolutely essential in how we accept the kingdom of God? Being physically very small? No. Unable to think like adults? (1 Cor 14:20). No. Lacking in wisdom? (Prov 22:15) No. Being utterly dependent on others for food, shelter, and clothing? No. First and foremost it is essential to receive the kingdom of God with childlike trust.

This precious attitude of heart is expressed in Psalm 131 as David writes: “*I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me*” (v2). Many of us have been blessed with loving mothers who have nurtured and cared for us. We have been close to them and likely will remain so as long as we both live. However, for some of us, we have been hurt, abused and/or abandoned by our mothers. When this happens to a child, not only is this foundational relationship damaged or broken, it can then be very difficult for such a wounded child to trust others. Trust is the bedrock of all healthy relationships. When the level of trust in one another is high the relationship can be close and strong. In contrast, when trust is eroded, damaged or broken, any relationship is weakened and may be severed completely.

Why is childlike trust in the One who offers us the Kingdom of God so essential? Because, whilst this Kingdom is about the rule and reign of Christ, about citizenship, belonging and inheritance; at the centre, entrance into this Kingdom is about the closest of relationships. God uses the language of intimate family bonds when He reveals His relationship with His people e.g. “*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son*” (Hosea 11:1).

Many people who have lived on this earth for more than a few years have what are often termed ‘trust issues’. Why? Because their trust has been broken or at least damaged. Naturally, young children are trusting, unless they have previously experienced trauma either in the womb or in the early months or years. Some people struggle to receive the kingdom of God like a child. There can be many reasons for this, including:

1. Previous painful wounds – physical, emotional and/or spiritual that make trusting anyone, including God, difficult.
2. Requiring more evidence of the reality of God’s Kingdom than He has provided e.g. seeing Jesus with their own eyes, experiencing what they would accept as a miracle, believing that God’s Word is true.
3. Struggling with God’s revelation that His Kingdom is to be received as a gift. Naturally as adults we learn to expect that we have to pay for good things. Even those who have a misguided sense of entitlement think in terms of their rights rather than the grace of receiving gifts that they do not deserve.
4. Believing that God is actually untrustworthy because He has not given what we desire. So often people like you and me may struggle with trust and faith in the Lord because we expect Him to give what He has never promised to us, whilst forgetting how much of what He has promised we have already received and trusting that in time He will most certainly deliver on all His promises.

Perhaps you can think of other reasons why you or others you know struggle to receive the kingdom of God like a child? Trust is at the centre of being like a child, but there are other characteristics that young children often exhibit: For example:

1. Unpretentious honesty. I remember that we once had some adult guests at our home and one of my sons who was about four at the time caught them smoking outside on the deck. He just said, ‘*You shouldn’t smoke, it’s bad for your health*’. That’s not wrong, but how many adults would say that to someone they don’t know? Many of the questions I have been asked by young children are wonderfully honest, direct, deep and relevant. They are the kind of questions most adults think about but are often too embarrassed to voice.
2. Joyful and content with whatever they have when they have it.
3. Humble dependence. They look to parents and others they trust to provide what they need. They don’t mind asking.

The call from our text today is not to become like little children is everything, but it is to trustingly, honestly, joyfully and humbly receive the Kingdom of God. To do so is to receive the greatest of blessings, which brings us to our third point.

1. **Blessed Children (v16)**

By this stage in Mark’s gospel we have seen many different kinds of needy people come to Jesus including the sick, blind, and demon-possessed. Interestingly though, notice that there is no indication that these children were being brought to Christ for healing of any kind. Their parent(s) wanted Him to touch these children, to lay his hands on them in order to bless them. What did they expect would happen to their children as a result?

Well, it’s helpful to see that most, if not all, of those bringing the children were very likely Jews. Jesus was travelling south towards Jerusalem and was passing through the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan (10:1). Beyond (or across) the Jordan river refers to the district called Perea. The inhabitants of both Judea and Perea were almost all Jewish in the 1st century AD. They knew the Old Testament Scriptures well; being regularly taught in their synagogues. They believed that the laying on of hands by a priest or a rabbi could confer the blessing of God. They knew the words of the blessing that Aaron and his male descendants were to bless the people of Israel with: *“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace”* (Num 6:24-26).

When God blesses people, He conveys His divine favour on them. Back in Genesis 12, God made promises to Abraham, saying: “*I will make you into a great nation and I will* ***bless you****; I will make your name great, and you will be* ***a blessing****”* (Gen 12:2). As God fulfilled this promise, the descendants of Abraham became the nation of Israel and God promised to bless them if they obeyed His commandments. God then listed what this blessing would be like, divine gifts like fruitful crops and productive livestock, victory in battle, prosperity and power over other nations. The birth of children would be part of this favour from God - they would be like arrows in the hand of a warrior (Ps 127:4). The people of Israel were told *“All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God”* (Deut 28:2).

The Jewish parents and caregivers in Judea and/or Perea who had brought their little children to Jesus were part of the nation of Israel. They and their children were God’s chosen people – the physical descendants of Abraham with whom God had made a promise: Gen 17:7 *“I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you”.* God, the Creator of the Universe, had promised to be the personal God of Abraham and his descendants. He would be their God and they would be His people. The male Israelite children would have been circumcised on the eight day as a sign of this covenant agreement which God had made with Abraham and his offspring. Because of this covenant, all the children (male and female) who grew up in Jewish homes were blessed by being able to hear about the personal God of Israel from their parents; as we heard from our reading in Deut 6:4-9.

It therefore makes sense to understand that when Jesus laid hands on the children brought to Him, His was a covenant blessing. This blessing was an indication of God’s special favour on children born into the community of Israel. It would also have been for any children born to Gentile parents who had faith to believe that Jesus could convey the blessing of God upon them. Notice that Jesus does not say to the children He blesses ‘*your sins are forgiven*’ (as He did to the paralytic in Mark 2). Neither does He pronounce that they have entered His Kingdom.

There is a parallel here between Christ’s blessing of these children and God’s instruction to Abraham that He and all His male offspring must be circumcised as ‘*a sign of the covenant between me and you*’ (Gen 17:11). We know that by no means all those in Old Testament Israel received the full blessings of the covenant because they did not trust the Lord their God. For example, circumcised Ishmael received some temporal blessings from God, including offspring who would become a great nation (Gen 17:20). Yet Ishmael did not trust in the Lord and did not enter the Kingdom of God.

As a church, we are **not** the covenant community of Old Testament Israel. We do **not** circumcise young boys as a command from the Lord. However, we are, as a covenant community, part of the New Israel, ‘*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation*’ (1 Pet 2:9). All here who have entered the Kingdom of God by childlike faith in Christ are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, heirs according to promise (Gal 3:29). As a church we believe that the Old Testament covenant sign of circumcision has been replaced by baptism.

**Just as** in Old Testament Israel those males who were not circumcised as children (almost always Gentiles), were circumcised as adults if they came to trust in the God of Israel; **So**, for those who receiving the Kingdom of God with childlike faith and trust as adults and who have not been previously baptised, are baptised when they publicly profess their faith. **Just as** in Old Testament Israel male children were circumcised as infants: **So**, for those who have been born to a believing parent or parents, we baptise them as a sign of God’s covenant.

The sign of the covenant points to the reality of the blessings of God’s Kingdom, but **does not itself** confer those blessings - any more than a road sign 100s of kms away from here saying ‘Christchurch’ is this city. Just as when Jesus laid hands on those children, He did not automatically confer the blessings of the covenant on them, but pointed to the favour of God on Abraham, the father of faith and his offspring.

If the children upon whom Jesus laid hands that day were to receive the kingdom of God, they would need to have childlike faith in Christ. They, like all who desire the eternal blessings of the Kingdom, would need to come to believe that Jesus is their Lord and Saviour. The One who died in their place for their sins and the One whose righteousness is credited to them by God’s grace. God’s Word says, "*Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD*” (Jeremiah 17:7).

Do you trust in the Lord with childlike faith that trustingly, honestly, joyfully and humbly receives the Kingdom of God from Christ the King? Come to Him like a little child – He will not refuse you, but will bless you with His unsearchable riches.

“*To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God*” (John 1:12).

AMEN.