

The powerless and the powerful: entry into the age to come

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost—23 October 2016
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Luke 18.15-30

Introduction

What a roller coaster ride this Gospel of Luke is. Widows and judges, Pharisees and toll-collectors, highs and lows and now, today, children and high status rich people occupy the human and social space of Jesus' world.

Jesus places himself in this very human space and explores it with an eye that seems to see it upside down and inside out. He portrays this strange world in his actions and his parables. He is aware it will end badly.

But he persists.

Receiving children, receiving the kingdom, vv. 15-17

“Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

Let me remind you how this topsy-turvy world of Jesus works. At the end of last week's stories we read,

“...or all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

We have heard this little saying before and we saw then that it placed a ticking time bomb under Roman social life, riddled as it was with concerns of status, wealth, power and social stratification.

Goodbye to it all.

And this story of his treatment of the children illustrates the good news of reversal that the cross and resurrection will bring.

People bring children, even babies, to Jesus to touch them. The scene is easily imaginable but obviously humiliating for Jesus' disciples. They do not want to be associated with such a scene in which women and children not only come to Jesus but he touches them.

The disciples act as Jesus' minders. They will choose who can and cannot come. And certainly it will not be low status people. Their master and, by implication his disciples, are much too grand for that.

Let's not romanticize children in the ancient world or our own. In antiquity children were prone to illness and abuse of all kinds so that a high mortality rate among children was the norm. No wonder the women wanted Jesus to touch the children in blessing and healing. Life could be very dangerous for children with the threat of exposure (especially girls) and sexual abuse common especially for slave children.

Among Jewish communities the threats were far less and as this story shows children were valued but still vulnerable and the threats still very real.

Ideas of children being 'open to the future', 'innocent', 'trusting' are not the first that come to mind when considering the first century. In the end, in the scale of things, children possessed little if any intrinsic value.

Luke emphasizes the vulnerability of children when he speaks of “even infants” being brought to Jesus. To his Roman readers for whom he was writing this would have been a reminder of the widespread practice of infanticide and abandonment.

So the disciples reason: Why should Jesus’ time be taken up with such people? There is a person of high status and wealth waiting in the wings, ready to take centre stage in the drama of the kingdom?

Hospitality has played a central role in this telling of the Gospel story and it is central here. Denying access to the children means refusing to welcome them. That is what Jesus says:

“Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as one receives a little child will never enter it.”

Jesus is not referring to some trusting nature of a child as a lot of people say but is placing the burden on his disciples to be like him. Receiving children is tantamount to granting them hospitality, performing for them actions such as washing their feet, anointing them, giving them a kiss of greeting, or a touch of healing; all common offerings for people of equal or higher status to themselves.

But to children? Offer to children what the high-status are due? What sort of upside down kingdom is this? Should we extend respectful service and honour to the group most vulnerable and overlooked?

And children in our own day?

As a church we have our own shame and dishonour to live with. We can only act together here and be sure we commit ourselves to the upside down values of Jesus and to the service of welcome. We need to be sure that we govern ourselves not just by secular standards, although some have fallen far short even of that, but by the extraordinary standards of God who goes to the cross for the vulnerable.

But we live in a democratic society, too. We have a part to play in seeing that governance meets the standards of God’s justice of topsy-turvy hospitality.

The Amnesty report on conditions for detainees on Nauru and the subsequent 4 Corners report aired this week which emphasized the plight of children have troubled me deeply.

One of the deep problems of the ancient world was that children were often thought of only for their usefulness to family, to adults, for economic purposes. This is sometimes called utilitarianism. It is a common form of ethic in the modern world and Australia has a long history of utilitarian politics and social values.

So we see no problem abusing children for the purpose of deterring others. Let the world see what we can do. The abuse and non-hospitality for children is the centre piece of Australian utilitarianism. It is a murderous ethic. And it will prove murderous as other nations pick it up and use it. And once again the most vulnerable will cry out to Jesus that he might touch them.

And where will we be?

The problem of power and wealth

Now the stage is cleared of pesky children. The true inheritor of the kingdom emerges to take centre stage with a pious question that takes our minds away from troublesome questions. Here is a straightforward question that we all understand. “Good Teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

This is a loaded statement. Everything that Jesus has just said the ruler dismisses. He is playing status games. He conceives the interaction as two fine peacocks suitably admiring

each other's fine feathers. If he calls Jesus 'good' think what he might get in reply. He is playing the status game. My, what fine feathers you have. What do you think about mine?

The only trouble is Jesus does not play peacock. Jesus' reply, "No one is good but God alone" tells the ruler that Jesus is not about to play the game of status by the agreed rules. Jesus bluntly tells him that the terms of this interchange will not be set by the standard values of the ruler.

The ruler's feathers are good. He is a man of impeccable religious and moral pedigree. The rehearsal of the commandments and his response is unremarkable. What he is not prepared for is what Jesus does next.

The underlying question here is, "How are these commandments lived out in the community of Jesus' followers." I want you to understand that Jesus is not giving a systematic analysis of the commandments. Commandments work in communities. They are social and the commandments Jesus chooses are all social; they concern family, kin and community relations.

Jesus picks the middle commandment "You shall not steal" to be his launching pad. In Israel this commandment had a basic defining idea. Do not take from the community what God has provided for it. What God provides for others and for the whole is not yours to have. That is how the community of the Exodus saw it.

Jesus now draws the ruler in to see how the community of Jesus will make this commandment work. The answer must have stunned everyone as it still does today.

"Sell what you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me."

In other words Jesus says to the man, 'The way the commandment works among my disciples is that you have your wealth for the sake of the poor. Do not steal from them by not sharing with them.'

The significance of this blows the mind.

- Jesus takes up the biblical theme of God's concern for the poor.
- Then he reemphasizes his own commitment to the poor.
- Further, he rejects the man's total social system of honour; giving to get status, honour and power.
- And then instead, come follow me all the way to that most desirable of ancient honours, the cross.

The responses

The response of the man is disappointment and sadness because Jesus will not affirm his social status. Instead Jesus turns the searchlight of the kingdom on him.

Jesus response is a reminder that the connection between wealth, status and power is all but impossible to break. It is not the loss of money that worries such a man but the loss of standing.

The response of the bystanders is amazement. "Who then can be saved?" They think that there is a causal relationship between divine blessing and status, power, privilege and material possessions. What Jesus is tearing at is an ideology such as that. The power of that constructed world entraps the human being and their only hope is to cry to God.

And Peter's response? "Look we have left our homes and followed you?"

I can understand his need for assurance. This has been a startling exchange. And remember that they have received severe criticism for their rejection of children.

And assure them Jesus does. They still have a long way to go in learning how to live in the new order that Jesus brings but at least they are on the way.

Conclusion

The ruler is still there: A sad disappointed man. But now he knows what this new world order is. Children with nothing are before him. In this kingdom his standing and wealth have a whole new meaning and one he cannot bear to live with.

This eternal life begins now. The rule of God starts today. Following Jesus means reconstructing all our human relationships so they conform to God's very peculiar ways in Jesus. That means valuing the poor, vulnerable and abused as if they were one's own family and expecting nothing in return.

The rich man is a lonely figure who has yet to learn to say "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner."