

SERMON: Sunday – 13 August 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Navigating a Life of Faith and Learning Kingdom Lessons from Children

Genesis 39:1-20

Mark 10:2-16

Joseph is in an extraordinary position as both disempowered by way of his status as a slave under Potiphar's ownership, and yet delegated power to manage the household, which would inevitably have had ramifications for Potiphar's wife in that setting. This juxtaposition is then compared with Potiphar's wife's own status when Joseph rejects her advances and goes on to point out that she too is the property of Potiphar. While she tries to assert some power and authority over Joseph, he dismisses her attempt.

Joseph tries to be faithful to the responsibility that has been delegated to him by Potiphar, whereas Potiphar's wife displays faithlessness towards her husband. Joseph's ethical behaviour is perhaps borne out of a necessity for survival in a complex to navigate situation, he is trying to find the right thing to do, or perhaps the less bad thing and recognising always who has the ultimate power within the household: Potiphar.

One can delve deeper, of course, into the abuse of power here for what then follows is an accusation of rape and a rare occurrence of a woman's story being believed. Alas, it was a false accusation. As with all of these stories, one needs to treat this sensitively and seriously for false accusations of rape can destroy people's lives and the trust others might have in them. On the other hand, all too often real situations of rape, as was noted in last week's story about Dinah, are dismissed or ignored by society and judicial systems that are found wanting.

In the Genesis story it is Joseph who will suffer most as a result of what happens, losing his position in Potiphar's household and finding himself in prison where he will have to work again to build trust and gain responsibility. What happens as the years pass for Potiphar's wife we can only surmise. Does she find other ways to assert herself and her own desires, unbinding herself from the constraints of ownership by her husband? She does not seem to be afraid to question Potiphar's judgement when it suits her, which would have brought some shame upon him and required action.

What stands out perhaps most in the story is that in both Potiphar's household and in prison, the Lord was with Joseph "and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper." (Genesis 39:23)

Jospeh is held up as an example of someone trying to navigate faith in a stormy world. Trying to live a good life and do the right thing when there is temptation nearby and false accusation to boot.

And yet, and here's the key, the Lord was with Joseph and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper.

The gospel passage this week, like the Genesis passage, explores what it is to be faithful in life. The context for the Gospel passage is that John the Baptist had been loudly criticising Herod for having taken into his own bed his brother's wife. Jesus moves beyond the expected assertions of power and authority to a mutuality as found in the great creation story.

It wasn't like this in the beginning, he points out.

Wives and husbands are no longer two, but one flesh (and) what God had joined together, no one was to separate.

For God delights in unity, in bringing people together, not in division or breaking people apart.

Love delights in unity, in bringing people together, not in division or breaking people apart.

Jesus, Love with skin on, refuses to be trapped by the loaded questions he faces - like, is divorce lawful?

Instead of firing off a simple yes or no, Jesus tries to assert a more inclusive and expansive understanding of faithfulness and commitment than the narrow one they were expounding.

This more inclusive world view was emphasised practically when Jesus sees that younger ones are being turned away by even his own followers. There is no place for children amongst the cohort of followers and listeners to Jesus, they believe. Surely one needed a certain maturity and understanding before being considered for the kingdom.

(It's maybe not unlike saying that ministers need a degree in theology before they can minister. But I don't want to drift off on the wrong tangent here so let us keep it on the disciples idea that children were too young to be of any use and so there would be no place for them).

Jesus turns that notion on its head, inviting the children (and, no doubt, the women who cared for them) to come closer and share in his life and ministry.

Verse 14 - Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

A kingdom for such as these.

A kingdom for people who are to God like children.

A kingdom for people who are prepared to live knowing they are beloved children of God with the trust and expectation that comes with being a child.

Trust that the Parent has your best interests at heart.

Trust that the Parent loves you without condition.

Trust that the Parent will keep you safe from harm.

An expectation that the Parent will enable you to grow.

An expectation that the Parent will provide the resources for that to happen.

An expectation that the Parent will treat all their children the same.

An expectation that the Parent Views the Child as infinitely precious and has a unique place under the Reign of God.

Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it (15).

I came across a story this week which reminded me of the NT's claim that our true selves are hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3).

The story is in a recent book by Tara Brach called *Trusting the Gold: Uncovering Your Natural Goodness*.

In it she tells the story from 1950's Bangkok in which a huge clay statue of the Buddha began to crack due to heat and drought. When some monks arrived to investigate, they shined a torch into the largest of the cracks. What they saw surprised everyone. Deep under the grey clay was the gleam of gold.

No one had known that inside this popular but ordinary-looking statue was a solid-gold Buddha. As it turns out, the statue had been covered with plaster and clay six hundred years earlier to protect it from invading armies. Although all the monks who lived in the monastery at that time had been killed in the attack, the golden Buddha, its beauty and value covered over, had survived untouched.

She then used this story to compare how people often cover over their own innate purity and goodness as they encounter a challenging world and this often begins in childhood.

All too often children are criticised, ignored, misunderstood, or abused, leading them to doubt that gold within. As children grow up, they increasingly internalise the judgments and values of our society, further losing touch with their innocence, creativity, and tender hearts, who they truly are.

Its as if they cover over the gold within as they seek to accommodate the approval of others, looking to them to measure their worth—to determine whether they are good enough, smart enough, or successful enough.

Tara Brach, *Trusting the Gold: Uncovering Your Natural Goodness* (2021),

This is why good parenting of children is so important. A healthy positive influence and exposure to the truth of their unique preciousness from a young age is crucial or at least it makes life so much better.

But of course we should add that all is not lost for those who have had a poor upbringing and that the gold within, our true selves hidden with Christ in God, is kept for us to be uncovered at any age.

For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God.

Jesus didn't just applaud the fact that children must be included in the kingdom, he goes even further and insists that everyone must become like a child in this kingdom.

Children receive a gift with great joy and excitement.

We are to do likewise.

Children receive a gift without questioning where it came from.

We are to do likewise.

Children receive a gift with thankful hearts.

We are to do likewise.

I find it interesting that Mark's Gospel (and Matthew's, which was based on Mark's) couples this story with the teaching on divorce. To me, its as if Jesus, tired with the hard hearted Pharisees attempts at getting around the Law of Love by making divorce permissible, shifts the focus onto the implications for children, and the often forgotten impact that divorce can have on them.

Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of hard hearted people and says to them, let me talk to you about children and how you can learn a lesson from them when it comes to the things of faith.

For unless you receive life like a child, you'll never live it.

Let us pray ...