

**SERMON: 30 September 2018 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

**“Whoever is not against us is for us - Millstones, Amputations and Salt”**

**(Mark 9:38-50)**

Today’s gospel story wasn’t the only time where Jesus used a little child to illustrate his kingdom. Here he is taking a little child and placing the child in the middle of the disciples. Remember the context was that the disciples had been arguing on the road which one of them is the greatest.

“I’m the greatest!”

“No, you’re not. I am!”

“No, neither of you are. It’s me. I’m the oldest!”

“But I was here first!”

But Jesus takes children, who have little or no power, and makes them the centre of his kingdom. No wonder he tells us that unless we change and become like little children we will never enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 18:3).

Children and child likeness have a central place in God’s reign. So here’s a question for the Church. How are we doing when it comes to centring Church around children and young people and child likeness? How are we honouring the place of children and young people, and the attitude of child likeness?

Because it seems to me that it is weakness, smallness and powerlessness that are the attitudes that matter to Jesus.

It’s from tiny seeds and small beginnings, that greatness comes. It’s from little talents that something of worth can grow.

That’s why we’re never to despise the day of small beginnings (Zech. 4:10). The kingdom of God begins in weakness, in smallness, in powerlessness, and it’s this kingdom that will prevail beyond all other things.

Can you think of something that started off very small and fragile and grew stronger or bigger? What was it like in the very early stages? What did you have to do to make sure it survived? How did you protect that which was vulnerable?

(Babies, plants, projects, works of art, learning a skill or musical instrument ...)

Jesus warned his followers that how they treated little ones mattered. They mustn't cause them to stumble. They mustn't do anything that would turn them away. They mustn't mistreat them or ignore them or not cater for them. Because if they caused them to stumble in any way they'd be better off thrown into the sea with a millstone around their neck.

Have you ever tried to swim with a millstone? You can't do it. You can't survive in the sea with a millstone round your neck. You go straight to the bottom of the sea and you stop breathing after a few minutes at the most.

Jesus is using exaggeration to stress how important this is. It's really important that children and young people and child likeness and weakness and vulnerability find a home in the centre of God's kingdom. The Church must be a place where powerlessness leads. Because God can work with that. It's in our weakness that God's power is made perfect. In other words, when the weak and vulnerable are welcomed, even if it costs us, then his power will move. The Church must be good news for the poor, the small, the weak and the powerless. It's the vulnerable that must be welcomed and nurtured. Then we will see the kingdom come in power.

And as if the millstone exaggeration wasn't enough, Jesus tells his followers that this is so important that even if it means losing a hand or a foot or an eye, that would be a price worth paying. He's not expecting people to go away and cut off limbs! He's emphasising how important this is. Childlikeness is a core value of his kingdom and must be at the core of all we do; at the centre of how we relate to God and to one another.

It strikes me that this is another example of Jesus hitting the disciples with the strange truths of the upside down values of the kingdom of God. He's smashing a few untruths. He's stressing that this new kingdom is not like the power of empire that the people see happening around them. They look around and see the way the nations are being governed and they see everywhere, the corrosive power of empire, which puts wealth in the hands of a few. They see greed as being the norm. And they are tempted to think that the kingdom that they want their Messiah to bring must also fight its corner and be equally aggressive and corrosive.

But God doesn't work that way. Not according to Jesus. Nothing could be further from the truth. His kingdom is about letting go, laying down, serving; not taking advantage of others, not exploiting the weak; not wrestling for first place; but

favouring the weak and nurturing the vulnerable and being like children in our loving Father's hands.

Now, in this kingdom, we might come across some unlikely allies. Jesus tells his followers that whoever is not against us is for us.

When some who are not part of the inner circle are found to be using the name of Jesus to do good, John and some of the disciples are not happy. "He's not one of us".

And here we find a common human problem. We want to classify people into two camps, one for us and one against us. We think of people as being either in our tribe or not in our tribe. We can take this to the extreme and decide that only those in our group can be accepted. Only our members can do the work or enjoy the benefits. So we have inclusion and exclusion, as if black and white.

Some people call this dualistic thinking and it's not helpful when it comes to most things. It's what makes us want to divide into them and us and we do it in just about every walk of life, especially when it comes to religion.

Now, I'm not going to push this one too far, because even the person out-with the group of disciples was using the name of Jesus to drive out demons. And Jesus is not saying that the name of Jesus doesn't matter. I happen to believe, and you might do too, that it is in Christ, and through Christ, that God is calling everyone and everything to Himself.

But we must avoid falling into the trap of excluding people along the way. We must always remain open to the possibility that God might work through absolutely anyone. That his kingdom is bigger than the Church, bigger than the Christian religion.

There are too many acts of kindness happening that are outside of the Christian faith for us to rule out the possibility of God working in people of other faiths and none.

What I think I mean by that is to say that I don't think God is limited to working only in what we understand as being the Church. Or as some others have said, there is the Church and then there is the Invisible Church, the one we don't see.

I think we need to look for connectedness with others. For example, I read something this week which quoted a passage from the Qur'an. The verse from the Qur'an reads, "wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115).

It reminded me that there are a lot of points of connection between people. Too often we highlight the differences and neglect our commonality. Maybe that's what the writer to the Hebrews meant when they said always welcome strangers because in so doing you may entertain angels unawares (13:2).

Jesus gave us good advice when he said whoever is not against us is for us. Let's look for God in the faces of those who are not yet Christians. Why not consider everyone as the Son of God or the Daughter of God? I wonder how differently we might treat each other if we did this.

Jesus called his followers to have the qualities of salt - adding flavour and preserving. We are called to add flavour to the mix, in small doses. It only takes a tiny amount to make a real difference.

And as well as flavouring, salt preserves, it stops food from going bad. So we're invited to preserve and nurture the Christ life we have inside us, and use this life to stop others from going bad, by loving them with the same love God has given us in Jesus.