

**Transcript from Dr Jessie
Rogers**

Jesus puts a child in their midst and tells the disciples to welcome children as a way of welcoming Jesus. How can the Church take that seriously today?

An unintended consequence of taking seriously the safeguarding of children in the Church has been to further marginalise them within the life of the people of God. It can seem easier to just exclude children from a space or an activity than to put in place all that safeguarding protocols require. This moves the Church in the opposite direction from the journey that Jesus in the Gospels requires us to take. A good theology of safeguarding must enter into deep conversation with a theology of childhood and also, I will argue, a robust theology of power.

The stories of Jesus and the children in the Gospels present a beautiful image of openness and inclusion. But they also point to something very fundamental about what it means to be a community in whom the Risen Christ dwells. I will look briefly at three episodes in Mark's Gospel - which have parallels also in Matthew and Luke - to begin to form an answer to the question: *How can the Church take seriously Jesus' action of putting a child in their midst and telling the disciples to welcome children as a way of welcoming Jesus?*

II

All three of these teachings of Jesus occur within the same context. In Mark chapters 8-10, Jesus and his followers are on the way to Jerusalem and Jesus is preparing them for what lies ahead. Peter has spoken for the others in declaring that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed one sent by God that the people of God have been waiting for (Mark 8:29). They know who Jesus is, they think, and yet they are still not able to really see what that means.

Jesus has warned them to be on their guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod (Mark 8:15). That powerful little phrase alerts them to the dangers of power and status games and of an approach to religious practice that leads to self-righteousness and exclusion. And yet, as Jesus prepares them for his own suffering and rejection, they choose to dwell on a different understanding of what the coming of the Kingdom might mean. The yeast that Jesus has warned them against is already at work in their midst.

III

³³ Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9:33-37)

What is the antidote for this concern for power and status, this endless tendency to imagine the kingdom of God in the same way that the kingdoms of the world operate? It is to put a little child in the centre. The welcome or otherwise given to children is the welcome or otherwise given to Jesus Christ and to the Father. We are open to Christ in our midst to the extent that we are open to receiving and welcoming children.

IV

A few verses later, after Jesus challenges the disciples' sharp insider versus outsider thinking (see Mark 9:33-37) he warns them:

⁴² "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. (Mark 9:42)

[Some manuscripts have 'believe in me' others just have 'little ones who believe'. So this might be referring to the little ones within the community, or it may be a recognition of the spirituality that is the birthright of every child.]

This is a huge responsibility. Revelations of abuse have made it shockingly clear how 'welcome' of children can become something much more sinister. And other speakers in this series have spoken of the devastating effects that can have on the spiritual lives of children into adulthood. Perhaps this is why a concern for safeguarding can actually lead to further marginalisation of children. It seems less complicated that way. It is almost as if children become a danger in our midst. But that marginalisation is itself abuse. And the effect of that marginalisation on the Christian community is profound, in that we are excluding Christ. A community that closes its heart against children is closing its heart against Christ. Children in our midst are not the danger. They are a litmus test for the quality of our communities. If they are not safe, our communities are diseased and no one is safe within them. When children are safe, our communities are healthy. A community with children safely at the centre is a community that does not engage in power play or status games. It is one that reflects the fruit of the Spirit.

¹³ People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (Mark 10:13-16)

The yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod is at work in the disciples when they are concerned that Jesus not be distracted from the 'important' task of ministering to adults. Jesus' response is indignation. Their priorities are upside down. His command is clear - put nothing in the way of children coming to him. In fact, if we want to enter the Kingdom - if we want to live out the reality into which God invites us, we need to learn from children. Scholars like to discuss what it means to receive the Kingdom like a little child - what attributes do we need? In fact, the best way to cultivate those characteristics is to be in the presence of children and let their way of being rub off on us. Being with children reminds us how to be childlike. In welcoming children, we welcome the childlikeness within us that is open to entering the Kingdom.

A few concluding thoughts:

1. If something is safe for the most vulnerable, it is safe for everyone.
2. The decision, followed by whatever action is required, to put the child in the centre and not at the margins is a significant step in a process of conversion to a kingdom-of-God-compatible way of exercising power in the Church.

3. Bringing children and other vulnerable people to the centre is not so much a burden and extra work as it is an invitation and an opportunity to become communities that are more intentionally focused on Christ.
4. Our treatment of children is a true reflection of how we treat Christ.
5. A theology of safeguarding would find thoughtful and provocative dialogue partners in the theology of childhood and in a genuinely Christian theology of power.