

Sermon preached at St Stephen's

20 September 2015

Reading: Mark 9:30–37

Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Monday night I attended A Different Conversation organised by Incedo (formerly YFC) which has as its aim the creating of a safe space for conversation between the gay community and the church and faith community. It was a precursor for a much longer event being held on 25-26 September at Anglican Action. It raised for me the issue of how simply stating a position no matter how supportive, is relatively easy to do but the wider challenge is how we can live it out in practice as individuals and as a faith community. The hidden toll on our young gay people is very real and quite unacknowledged and there is a real fear of the censure and judgement that they continue to endure.

One of the speakers, a man in his forties I guess, began his talk with the phrase "I am a child of God." As he gave us a glimpse of his life story, at each significant turning point he would repeat this phrase, and follow it with "I am loved by God." He was able to see through the conditional love of his church community, of some of his family (his mother's was immediate and unconditional when he came out), of society. As he talked though I too came to take up the refrain "I am a child of God." If you can hold that within the depths of your soul then it has a power of inclusion that overcomes any barrier. If I am loved by God, so are you and so are you, and that makes us all one

We like to think we in Aotearoa New Zealand are an egalitarian society where everyone is equal. The truth is that we are not, not really. What we do is agree with the idea and then qualify it with our own definition of who "everyone" is and act on that. We set up our own pecking order and organise life around that, appeasing those who we perceive are above us, getting on with our peers and either bullying or disregarding those below us.

That was clearly some of the dynamic the disciples were playing out in their discussion on the road. They each wanted to be Jesus' right hand man, or if not right then the one at his left, a place of honour and power. They obviously had the discussion away from Jesus, but he was astute enough to realise something was up so confronted them. "What were you arguing about?"

Jesus then started the process of turning their world of power upside down. If you want to be first you must be servant. There were two kinds of servants in that world, slaves (*douloi*) who were owned and who had no choice but to obey orders, and servants (*diakonoi*) who freely enter into service. They are those who not so much abdicate their status as are forgetful of status concerns, and offer all absorbing and unstinting, even toilsome devotion to the well-being of the other and the community.

That's the shocking thing. We're invited to not worry about status however that is derived, whether through power or money, race or gender, or dare I say, sexuality. Of course I'm not talking about out in general society – that would be too much to ask. In the first instance we are talking about a way of living together in community that models a new way.

Jesus then goes further and takes a little child and put it in the midst of them, and then took it in his arms. Read Matthew's account and Luke's and you can see how this gets toned down. Matthew doesn't mention an actual child, and Luke has Jesus stand alongside the child. Traditionally we have romanticised the role of children. They have been portrayed as innocent, trustful and uncomplicated. Curiously, it was in the debate on the repeal of section 59 that Christian groups portrayed children as depraved little bundles of sin, who are constantly scheming to disobey authority.

Rather, Jesus is using the child to represent powerlessness: the weakest of the weak. The major factor in the way Jesus and Mark present this is that they represent the "little people" at the bottom of the heap. Who in our society are the ones at the bottom of the heap. Certainly children, certainly those involved in the education of our children and grandchildren. In fact, the younger and more vulnerable they are the less valued are the educators. Another group are the gay and lesbian community. There certainly have been a lot of attempts to portray them as somehow having gained power through the influence of a couple of political parties, jokes about cabals of lesbian women, and groups of gays try to normalise a view that says they have too many rights. That has been echoed again in the debate around marriage equality and the inequality still exercised by our churches.

Such a view is counter to the reality the gay community experiences. They are vulnerable to all sorts of actions. No one would take seriously stickers that say "Straights are a cancer in the church" or "Straights are not welcome in our church". Yet furore that arose over pernicious and anonymous stickers relating to the gay community which showed and continues to show just how vulnerable they are within the church and within our wider society. The welcoming of a child enacts the call to welcome others into the circle of community. Community is ongoing as individuals and even leaders come and go. That is what makes the welcome of others, including those who are vulnerable, all the more crucial. For if we cannot find and give welcome here, where can welcome be found?

Mark portrays Jesus as "childlike" in the sense of being utterly without pretension and willingly accepting the crucifixion fate which he predicted for himself, trusting faithfully that even that dreadful end would not be an unrelieved disaster, but somehow contains the seeds of vindication and produce an ultimate benefit for humanity.

As church, we form a community that embraces, empowers, and equips. When we reach out with Jesus' welcome to all, including those who are vulnerable, we are living in God's ways. Who might Jesus be setting in our midst today while saying, "whoever welcomes one such...welcomes me"? In what ways do our own vulnerabilities as individuals and as a church shape how we care for others?

The challenge to us as followers is to ensure that the weakest of the weak: children, the gay community, refugees, those suffering mental ill-health and others, do not get victimised and sent on the same path as Jesus travelled. Jesus' attitude, which is to be our attitude, mirrors the essential nature of God: gracious, life giving, compassionate and unpretentious, and spontaneously, liberally giving of healing, reconciling love.