

Chinley and Buxworth
H.C. 4.10.15

RELATING TO ONE ANOTHER

Psalm 8
Mark 10:2-16

We are faced in this Gospel reading with issues concerning relationships which continue to influence society, even with changing times and views: the value of children and the value of marriage. In both, I think it's how we relate to God that affects how we relate to others. Let's start with children.

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them but the disciples rebuked them....Jesus was indignant...."anyone who does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" he said (Mk 10:13-16)

When I visited Uganda, a little cluster of children would follow us wherever we went. They were expected to fetch and carry and cook and labour; they were expected, often, to stay out of the way of adults. At one lunch, the white visitors –ourselves- were on the 'top table' under an awning. Everyone else sat on benches in the heat. It began to pour with rain. People scurried to take shelter where they could, some under our awning. When the shower was over, one little boy remained, curious, at my side. He climbed on my lap. He was shouted at and got off. But soon he was back. I lifted him up. He was shouted at, I assured people it was alright. He fell asleep.

In our culture at the moment there are times when it seems that the whole world revolves around children. People let them choose and pick and state what they want. Some people would say there is far too much attention given.

Jesus invites children to come when others want to stop them from climbing onto his lap when there's a rain shower and people who meant to be far more important are present. In Matthew's version of this little story, it's even more deliberate than just 'don't hinder them'. Matthew says that Jesus 'placed' a child in the midst, to make his point. What is his point? That becoming like a child is the key to the kingdom of God. If you want to be in the place where God rules with goodness and kindness, mercy, love, perfect freedom, fairness, and joy, then you have to learn this!

What is a child best at? Receiving. A child doesn't weigh up and analyse so much as we do; a child trusts and comes and takes. Sometimes, yes, there can be dangers in that. But the point is that a child depends, needs, is humble enough to receive. And us? We have been disappointed by people who didn't do what they said; we have become anxious about things in the world so we want to protect ourselves from hurt; we feel that perhaps if we became more important or better at something than someone

else we might be in a better position, might be greater. So we go off with all our learnt ways of getting an advantage and thinking 'it's all down to me' to get what I need. We use power over people in subtle ways and we often fail to trust others or God.

Jesus makes a child the example. The child is not after greatness: he probably hasn't learnt what that is yet. The child is humble – not by choice but because he's got a small status. But the child knows what it means to want a blessing and go to Jesus to get it.

One writer says this: *humility implies giving space to others, becoming vulnerable, living by faith....it does not make for success in battle, diplomacy or in the market....*(Haddon Willmer/Keith White – 'Entry Point' p.124) Yet humility is what Jesus showed in refusing to fight for greatness himself.

If you will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child you won't enter it, says Jesus, as he opens his arms to welcome the children in.

Have you ever thought of that? Do you want to *receive* the kingdom of God or to *make your way into it* yourself? You see, what Jesus is saying is that you can't do enough to work your way in, you haven't got anything to give that God hasn't given you already so it is all about receiving, trusting, going to him, in small stature, to have his welcome and blessing.

The same writer I mentioned above says that receiving- reception '*includes a command for responsible human action, aiming to make beauty, love and abundant life out of the raw material of our earthly being*'. Then 'welcome' and 'receiving' is also an *invitation to pass it on* – to pass on what you have received of love, beauty and life.

This little incident isn't just showing how Jesus relates to children; it's about how we're meant to relate to Jesus.

So if all of that's true, how does it help us think about that other issue that's still such a sensitive and often heart-rending problem in our day, of marriage and divorce?

If receiving is about something free and unmerited and about aiming to make beauty, love and abundant life come out of the raw material of our earthly being and welcome is about an invitation to pass it on, then some of these things should be at the heart of our relationships with other adults too.

The way Jesus acts and speaks about little children shows us something about how to be human in the way God intended. When Eve is created it's to be a helper alongside

Adam. There's a sharing in responsibility and a delight and an intimacy with each other and with God. I don't think you can separate the relationship that Adam has with God from the relationship he has with Eve. When it all goes wrong after that terrible apple incident, they're at odds with God as well as each other.

So Jesus knows things have gone wrong, people have become hard hearted (v.5) and find it hard to live with each other in faithful marriage relationships. Even so, he says, when God started it all off he made them *male and female* and they were meant to be together, united as if one person. God joined them up. Don't let anyone pull them apart (v.6-9). So far, so clear.

But those desires for greatness had kept on creeping in during Moses' day. It wasn't about welcoming any more or making something of beauty and love and life out of raw material; it wasn't so much about serving, receiving and humility. It had got to the point where the law said a man could divorce *.... a woman who becomes displeasing because he finds something indecent...* (Deut 24:1-4)

Where have the values of love, beauty, receiving, welcoming, passing on God's welcome and blessing gone? What is 'displeasing'? What is 'indecent'?

Nobody really knew. As a concession, divorce was allowed. Jesus knows it happens. It doesn't make it good. He also knows that the woman was counted less than equal so he says *'anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her'* (v.12_It's the first time someone has suggested that men might be the guilty party too.

Divorce causes untold trauma for partners, children, families- and the effects (and the disintegration in society) go on for years. I think it was the spirit of the Law that Jesus wanted to uphold – as he always did. This *was* not – and *is* not- about who's right and who's wrong and what is written in black and white. There have to be ways to deal with marriage breakdowns when they happen. Yet what I think is at the heart here is how we relate to God and therefore how we relate to each other.

For Jesus, the little child summed up the ideal of a relationship with God. A child who plays, who trusts, who goes, who receives, who has little or nothing to give, who isn't acting out intentions for greatness, who passes on the blessing, who we imagine will show something of beauty and love and grace in life to come out of the very raw material that is there at the start. This is living as a fully human being.

When that child in Uganda trusted me enough to fall asleep in my arms, I can tell you, there was a blessing passed on -to me-and the dirty hands, scruffy clothes and snotty

nose didn't matter one tiny bit.

That is perhaps something of how we are to live with each other and how marriages are meant to be- offering welcome and blessing to those who trust. After all, that psalm we heard earlier says that God has created human beings to be only *'a little lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honour -(Psalm 8:5)* We're valuable people!

Yet we all know that things often aren't lived as the ideal. There come to be times when whether married or not, we can't see a way round the hurts caused in relationships and to be separate seems the only option. There are times when people choose badly, make mistakes, change beyond understanding; some begin without an example of God's love to help them. There is also a culture which seems to erode the value of marriage and the sense of what it means.

But it is still the task of the Church to point to a lifelong faithful God who wants lifelong faithful marriage partners. It is still for us to help people sustain those relationships whilst showing the depth of compassion for those who need to ask or receive forgiveness. It is for the Church of God to show the guilty people into a repentance and new way of living and to love the hurt people back into trust.

God did make them male and female, to be joined together permanently, just as he is joined to us. Jesus did welcome little children who wanted blessing and would receive it and pass it on as an example of human living and trust in God. Jesus did show mercy and forgiveness for those who turn to him in need.

As we learn how to relate to Jesus, maybe we'll learn how to relate to each other in a better way.