

**Sunday 19th July 2020 - Reflection**  
**Rev. David Goodall**  
**Galatians 3:23-29 & Mark 10:13-16**

Prayer

Over the last few weeks we've been following the lectionary readings in our Sunday services and I've certainly been enjoying revisiting the parables about the Kingdom of Heaven and the passages from Romans. If you've been following the current Bible commentaries over recent week you'll know that the set reading for this week is the parable of the wheat and the weeds and you might wonder why we've not heard it this morning, if you're really being attentive you'll also notice we've moved from Mark to Matthew.

The reason why? As I was preparing for worship this week this passage of Jesus and the children kept coming to me, partly I guess because in more normal times we would have been at the bandstand this morning for the Holiday Club opening service but more significantly I believe because God was prompting me to reflect on the reading. So I decide to go with the prompting of God and to base this morning service on this reading a decision which was affirmed when Jethro came into my study and took the Jesus and the Children book of my bookshelf and said can we read this!

The encounter in Mark's gospel of the children coming to Jesus and the disciples turning them away before having their actions rebuked by Jesus is on one level a simple and straightforward story, a story which is familiar to us. Yet like so many of the familiar stories in the Bible it's one which has many levels to it and there is lots of us to discover as we read it.

It's a story which is placed by Mark between two other significant passages, one on divorce and the story of the rich man who asks Jesus about entering the Kingdom of Heaven. We don't know whether the three encounters occurred consecutively but Mark's placing of this passage about the children and the kingdom between the other two seems significant. The passages bridges these two other stories together whilst at the same time throwing light into them.

When a passage is familiar as this passage maybe to you we have to be careful not to think that we know what this story says or what it teaches us. It's easy to think oh yes I know the message of that bit of the Bible. When a passage is familiar it's good to ask is there anything new I can discover from the text and importantly what might the passage say to me today, what does it say into my current situation, how might it help me this week.

As I've read and reflected on this passage over the last couple of weeks I think it has three things to say to us as we begin the week of Hexham Holiday Club, as many of us are able to visit more places and see more people, as we continue to plan for and begin our post lockdown life as a church. The three things are:

1. Everyone can come to Jesus.
2. Sometimes we make faith too complicated.
3. When we make it complicated we stop seeing what is important.

Firstly, everyone can come to Jesus. As the children are brought to Jesus it is the disciples who rebuke those who are bringing them, it is those closest to Jesus who want to keep others - particularly noisy children - at a distance from Jesus. It's almost like the disciples create a ring of steel round Jesus. We don't really know why they do this, I'm not convinced it's because they want to keep Jesus to themselves, more likely that they want to protect Jesus from the crowd. Maybe it's been a busy day, maybe he's tired from teaching about divorce.

To me the disciples come across as seeking to protect Jesus but in doing so they actually exclude others from discovering who Jesus is and being blessed by him. As Christians there are times when if we are not careful we can do the same, often in the name of protecting the Church, or protecting the truth, or protecting what we know the gospel to mean, we put barriers up to others discovering who Jesus is. The truth of this passage of course is that everyone is welcomed by Jesus. Jesus wants everyone to be able to come to him and to discover his love. The last thing Jesus wants is for us to put barriers up of any sort which stop people discovering who Jesus is.

There is of course a fine line here, as Christians we are called to proclaim the Good News, the Good News that points people to Jesus and shows them the difference Jesus can make in their lives. Proclaiming the Good News means that we say what the truth is, who Jesus is, that we are honest about what it means to follow Jesus. The fine line is crossed though when we move from stating who Jesus is, what the Good News is to putting conditions on how we have to behave or ways we should conform in order to meet Jesus in the first place. As we see in this passage Jesus is big enough to cope with however people come to him, once they have met Jesus he'll help them to discover if there are parts of their lives to be reshaped but that's for Jesus to do not us.

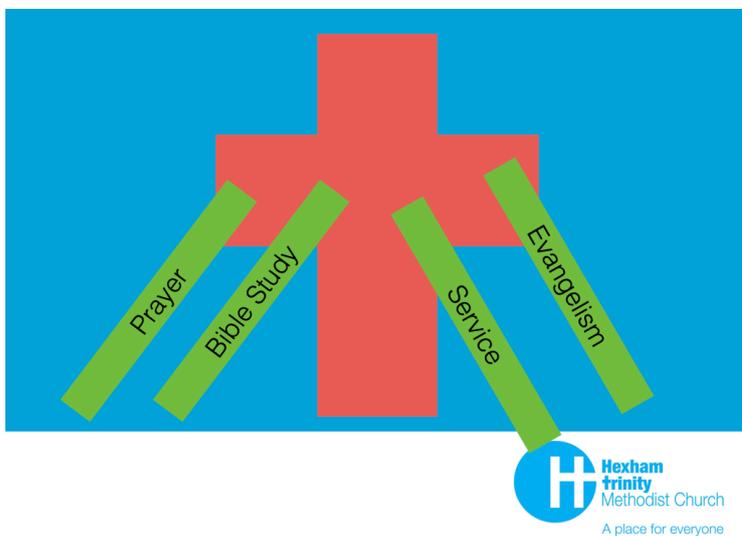
Paul reminds us in the passage we heard from Galatians that once people come to know Jesus they are children of faith and that our and their identity comes first and foremost from being followers of Jesus. Christians are united by our faith in Jesus and we are united in that in all our diversity. Paul says that *'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'* In Paul's time so many people from different backgrounds were coming to faith in Jesus but there was many questions about whether there should be Jewish Christians, Gentile Christians, could slaves and owners all be Christians together. Today our multicultural world is rich in its diversity but broken by the intolerance of those who are different. There are too many isms, racism, sexism, ageism, too many phobias and if we are not careful they become barriers to people coming to Jesus, they become reasons for the Church to try and protect a particular way of doing things, they become reasons for expecting people to conform to particular way of being God's people which then stops people even meeting Jesus, just as the disciples stopped the children being brought to Jesus.

This passage reminds us that God wants everyone to come to know Jesus and God is God and therefore doesn't need us to be God's protector. We are called to point to Jesus, to proclaim the Good News and not to put any barriers up to people coming to know Jesus.

Secondly, sometimes we make faith too complicated. This is the second message of the passage. Just as we the disciples are taught that they must let the children come to Jesus, we are told if we cannot receive the Kingdom of Heaven like a little child we will not enter it. This is where the phrase a child like faith comes from.

Think about how a child can be in awe of something simple. Think for a moment about when a child sees a rainbow or opens a gift. The awe and wonder which a child has is something amazing to see. They don't make it complicated, they don't ask hundreds of questions they simply accept it, see its glory and its blessing. Of course over time they explore it, they start to understand it but the childlikeness that we glimpse here in this passage starts with an awe and a wonder.

As Christians we all need to have that awe and wonder for Jesus, we need to be able to step back and be able to see Jesus, to remember why we follow him, to remember and be in awe of his amazing love for us, of his amazing gift of new life, of forgiven life, of the cross and empty tomb that are at the centre of our faith. That isn't to say that we don't need any others aspects of faith, that isn't to say that we shouldn't be seeking to grow as disciples, seeking to deepen our knowledge of God or grow in our prayers lives. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't be walking with the spirit or sharing in the mission of the Church. Of course we need to do those things, they are all part of what it means to be disciples. But we mustn't get too engrossed in those things, if we do, we make it too complicated, we lose sight of Jesus, we lose sight of the cross, we forget the awe and wonder that comes from knowing Jesus, that sense of awe we might have had when we first met Jesus.



As I was preparing this week I had a really strong image come to me which reflects what I'm trying to say here. It's this image, the image of the cross, the cross for me represents the awe and wonder that I see in Jesus, it's the centre of our faith. That faith is supported by those different aspects of discipleship I've just mentioned prayer, scripture, worship, service, evangelism. They are aspects of our faith that flow from Jesus, flow from the cross. But they flow from

Jesus, they flow from the cross. They are not supports which hold the cross up, they are not essentials that without the cross falls over, that God ceases to exist, they flow from the cross, they

enable us to live out the cross. Yes, they make faith richer, deeper, greater but it is God who they flow from. If you like they are mortar between the bricks but they are not the bricks. When we make our discipleship practices the bricks we make it too complicated. If the mortar is taken away though the bricks will still stand up, our faith may be a bit less stable, we might wobble a bit but taking the mortar away doesn't make the bricks disappear, does not stop God being God.

At the heart of Christian faith must always be God, God revealed in Jesus, new life offered through Jesus' death and resurrection. If we stop seeing Jesus, if we cease to have awe and wonder for Jesus, we stop having that child-like faith which this passage reminds us we need.

Thirdly, when we make it complicated we stop seeing what is important.

At times as Christians we can make faith and church so complicated, we can add so many layers and activities that we stop seeing what is important. If we're not careful we add all these extra things into the picture, prayer meetings, opening a soup kitchen, doing a theology degree, a new study group, helping at a charity shop. On their own they are all good things, they can all flow from the faith we have in Jesus. But when we try and do them all, if we add them all into the mix rather than looking for what is flowing from Jesus they we end up losing sight of what's important, we add so many layers on that there is no way we can have a child like faith or be in awe and wonder of who Jesus is because we can't see Jesus, we can't see the cross, even if we know it's under or in there somewhere.



When we make it complicated, when we try to do too much, when we try to do it all rather than sharing things out or setting things down we stop seeing what's important, we stop being able to see Jesus. If we can't see Jesus, if we pile all these things into our Christian lives then there is no way that others will be able to see Jesus through us, there is no way we can point others to the cross or share the Good News because we've made it too complicated. Last week Richard reminded us in his sermon on the parable of sower that we are the farmers called to sow the seed of Good News, the seeds of God's grace but to do that we need to have enough space in all we do to be able to see Jesus so that others can see the Jesus we are talking about when we sow the seeds of his love and grace.

For me this passage about the children coming to Jesus has so much in it for us. It reminds us:

1. Everyone can come to Jesus.
2. Sometimes we make faith too complicated.
3. When we make it complicated we stop seeing what is important.

It reminds us that at the heart of our faith is the God who is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, that at the heart of our faith in the cross and the empty tomb from which new life, free life, forgiven life, eternal life flows, from which all that we are and do as Christians flows.

As we all take our next steps from lockdown we've been talking a lot about what the church will do, what the church lockdown plan is and that is good. It's a plan which will come alive because we are all a part of it and all have a part to play. But moving forward from lockdown also gives each of us an opportunity to reassess what we are doing and how we are doing it as disciples of Jesus. It gives us an opportunity to make sure that we can see Jesus, that we can see the cross and that what we are doing as Christians is flowing from Jesus, flowing from the cross, flowing from new life. Moving forward gives us a chance to check we are not doing so much that we've lost sight of the cross or if we go back to everything we were doing before lockdown that we will be in danger of not being able to see Jesus at all.

So I pray that the familiar words of this passage and some of my many words will have spoken to you today. I pray that they will have reminded you of the awe and wonder that we find when we stand before Jesus and see him love for us. I pray that they will have reminded you that from that love flows wonderful blessings, callings, activities but that if we do too much or seek too many we can make faith too complicated and lose sight of Jesus. I pray these words will inspire you to seek that awe and wonder as a child would, to check in with God about which bits you need and which are making life complicated, to commit to the right things with God and through that to help others to stand with you in awe and wonder of Jesus and his love for you. Amen.