

**Sermon:** Like children?

In 2018, Beth, Hazel and I visited our now son-in-law, Sam, in Japan when he was studying there.

On our first full day there, we were in Tokyo – and we headed to one of the tourist attractions – the Castle Gardens. The castle itself – like so many things in Japan – had burned down long ago, but the foundations were there, and the gardens are still there and are still a popular place for visitors and locals alike – I guess much like the Botanic Gardens in Sydney.

As Beth, Hazel, Sam and I walked up to the entrance, we were greeted by a group of young Japanese. They explained that they were university students, and they said they would be most grateful if they could be our guides, so that they could practice their spoken English.

It sounded like a great idea, so we said yes, and we ventured into the gardens together. There were seven of them – they were from a few different universities, but had all come to the gardens with the same idea – and there were four of us. Now a group of eleven people can't really walk along and have a conversation together, so as we walked around the gardens, we formed groups of two, three or four people, and talked a bit, and then as we came to various features, we came together, and then we broke up into different groups to continue wandering around the gardens.

We talked about different things at different times, and at the end of the day Beth and I exchanged stories and things we'd learned from the students – and there were lots that one of us had heard but the other hadn't.

Of course, that's what happens when large groups of people travel together, you can't have an 'all in' conversation, but you can have lots of conversations in smaller groups. I'm pretty sure, that's what's happened in our reading from Mark's gospel this morning.

Jesus and his disciples - the twelve of them – are travelling though Galilee, and Jesus is spending the journey teaching his disciples, or at least he's trying to – because they're not really getting it, yet.

We read it now, and we know the whole story, and we can think that the disciples were not that bright. But remember, they didn't know the whole story. And the news that "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the

hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise” (9:31) would have been pretty hard to believe.

And we read in verse 32, [...] But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it

You can imagine this group of people – thirteen of them, walking along the road. And groups of two or three or four would form, and they’d talk. Maybe some small talk. “How about the weather?” “Those sandals look good, where’d you get them from, Peter?” And of course, “Are we there, yet?”

And there would have been more serious conversations too “What do you reckon Jesus meant - he’s not really going to hand himself over to be killed, is he?”, “He can’t be serious that we’re not supposed to tell anyone he’s the messiah, can he?” and so on.

At the beginning of Chapter 9, Mark gives us an account of the transfiguration: When Jesus went up a high mountain, and somehow met with Elijah and Moses. And three disciples saw that happen, so that might have been mentioned in those conversations on the road.

And I can imagine maybe Andrew saying, “How come Peter, James and John got to go up the mountain and see that, but I didn’t?”, and no doubt the others would have been interested too. There seems to be this inner circle of three, or sometimes it’s an inner circle of four, with Andrew included too. So, why not Andrew this time, and what about all the rest?

And at various times, Peter seems to be favoured. And at other times, John. And so on.

Why were some disciples more important than others? Why did it change over time? And – if I’m one of the ones left out – how can I get to be the most important?

Finally, when they got to Capernaum, when they were all settled in the house, Jesus asked them “What were you arguing about on the road?”

We read that they didn’t answer. Because they’d ended up arguing with one another about who was the greatest. I guess they realised that Jesus wouldn’t approve of such discussion. Or perhaps they were worried that they’d overestimated their own importance and would have been humiliated by being corrected.

Jesus, it seems, sees this as an opportunity to teach his closest followers a really important lesson.

Verse 35 tells us that he sat down and called the twelve.

Mark telling us that Jesus sat down is important: He's sitting down to teach them. It's not just some offhand instruction, but he's going to take time to explain an important point, so he sits down.

As an aside, do you remember how the sermon on the mount starts?

We typically think of the sermon on the mount beginning in Matthew Chapter 5 with the beatitudes... you know "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"

But when you read Matthew five, you find the sermon on the mount actually begins like this:

Jesus saw the crowds and went up a hill, where he sat down. His disciples gathered around him and he began to teach them. Blessed are the...

He sits down, gathers the disciples, and begins to teach... and that's exactly what happens again here in Mark 9. Jesus sits down, gathers the disciples, and teaches them.

It's the Jewish tradition where the rabbi sits down to teach. Our tradition is that we generally stand up to teach – in church, in universities and schools, TED talks and even in business situations – standing up talking to powerpoint slides is pretty ubiquitous.

But when we're going to have a serious conversation with one person or a small group, we do sit down. Often with coffee or tea.

What he teaches his disciples on this occasion may not be as well-known as the beatitudes, but it is still pretty well known: verse 35 continues with Jesus teaching, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

The first must be last. Whoever wants to be first must be the servant of all.

It's a lesson that is repeated several times in the gospels.

The parable of the workers in the Vineyard from Matthew 20 – everyone who worked in the vineyard got the same pay – whether they'd been

working for an hour or the whole day, and not only that, the last to start were paid first, and the parable concludes with Jesus saying “So those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last”.

Or in Jesus’ discussion with the disciples in the chapter before, when he tells them (Matt 19:29-3): “..everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother for my sake, will receive a hundred times more and will be given eternal life. But many who now are first will be last, and many who are now last will be first.”

As we see so often in the gospels, what Jesus says is not what the world expects. The world thinks first in, best dressed. The world thinks that the more you work, the greater the reward. The world honours the rich and the powerful.

But Jesus tells us something quite different. The last will be first. The reward is eternal life... and we get to respond to that by working for God. Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And of course, Jesus himself: Jesus who gave up the glories of heaven to become human, to be born a defenceless child in a stable in Bethlehem. Jesus who gave up his life to save us. Jesus who was rightfully a king, but who became a servant.

Compare that to the disciples were walking along arguing about who the greatest among them was.

Jesus doesn’t tell them that they’re wrong or stupid. But neither does he leave it there, instead, he spells it out with a demonstration. Verse 36 “Then he took a little child and put [the child] among them; and taking [the child] 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.”

In modern society we’re quite keen on children. We celebrate them. We go to great lengths and expense to have them, and to raise them.

Although we don’t always celebrate them, because sometimes they can be quite annoying. And messy. And noisy.

But I’m told that in the first century, they weren’t celebrated at all. They were a burden. They were other mouth to feed. And you had to look after them for a long time before you could send your sons out to work or marry your

daughters off. Forget the attitude of children being best seen and not heard, it was more a case of best not seen nor heard.

And yet Jesus reaches out and picks up a small child, and places the child among the disciples. The child might have been noisy, or hungry, or even needed a nappy change... A child wouldn't have been welcome in a crowd of grownups... But Jesus says welcome this child and you welcome me. And if you welcome me, you welcome God.

So we see that we can welcome God, not simply not simply in song or prayer, but in welcoming others.

In recent years – at least before Covid – there are churches which had big signs up saying “Refugees welcome here” which is a good thing, but I sometimes wonder when they last did.

Many churches have signs which say “All welcome” or “Everyone welcome” which is also a good thing, but we need to consider how welcome would someone who wandered in really be. They might be welcomed, but are they made to feel welcome. Because there is a difference.

I heard the Rev Keith Garner speaking about the problem a few years ago, and he talked about how there were some churches that welcome people to death. At the foyer, at the door of the chapel, by an official greeter, by the minister, by an elder, at morning tea. He pointed out that welcoming people is far more than simply greeting people over and over again.

As I talked about a couple of weeks ago, we're generally quite well disposed to people who are like us, and we can wear it as a badge of honour if we welcome people who are quite different to us, but the problem, I think, often arises with people who are just a bit different to us.

The child that the disciples were invited to welcome would have been a burden. So what about those who would be a burden to us – those that would come to church but can't contribute financially, or can't be on a roster for whatever reason, or can't attend regularly or – like small children - can't listen quietly in church?? What about all of those, and so many more.

It's all different at the moment, of course, as we're all participating in on line church in our homes. We can do it exactly as we like at the moment, without the distraction of other people.

But in the near future, hopefully at the end of October, we will be gathering together again. People will be welcoming each other back to church. I'll be meeting many people for the first time, but for most people, you'll be greeting each other again. It will be a great time, and a joyous one.

That's the way we need to think about welcoming all people all the time. Joyously. Excitedly. The good news of Jesus, who lived and died and rose again for us, is exactly that – good news. We should be joyous in our sharing of it.

In the next Chapter of Mark's gospel (10:13-16), we read of people bringing their children to Jesus, and the disciples trying to turn them away, so even the disciples, who heard it straight from Jesus himself, hadn't quite grasped today's lesson yet.

And we read that Jesus was angry, and famously he said to them "Let the children come to me". I can't help but think that the King James version translation of that verse seems to miss the point slightly to modern ears when it has Jesus saying "Suffer the little children to come unto me..."

These days, it not so much a case of letting children come to Jesus, but encouraging them to. As I've visited many churches, one of the common things I've heard is "We wish we had children here", and often people reminisce about the days when there was a bustling Sunday school.

But society has changed, peoples lives have changed and the fact is that most churches these days – Uniting Churches at least – no longer have Sunday Schools or children's programs.

We need to be prepared for children when they do come to church – to put up with the noise and the inconvenience. And we of course need to encourage people to bring their children – and grandchildren to church.

Jesus, though, wasn't simply talking about literal children when he was teaching the disciples. For Jesus' original listeners, welcoming a child into adult company would have been outside their experience. What could a little child contribute to the conversation? What could a little child do for group?

I think we modern Christians can think a bit like that: asking what this person can contribute, what they can do for us.

The author CS Lewis wrote that "Children have one kind of silliness, as you know, and grown-ups have another kind."

We can always find reasons to not welcome people. We can dismiss all kinds of people as having silliness of one sort or another.

It's so easy to judge others, and write them off, and stick to the people who are like us. But that's not what Jesus did. He reached out – to the powerful like Nicodemus, to the outcast like Matthew the tax collector, to the foreigner like the Samaritan woman at the well, to the little child he place among his disciples.

Our reaching out might not be standing on street corners quoting scripture, but it is proclaiming the gospel, God has been generous to us, and we have been generous in turn. This is sharing the good news of Jesus. As Jesus said “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

Amen.