

All Saints Talk Sunday 20 March 2023

'Be nurturing'. By Claire Parr

Reading: *Luke 18:15-30 The little children and Jesus.*

Mothering Sunday

How's your mother's day going? Is it filled with breakfast in bed, cards and phone calls with deep and heartfelt expressions of gratitude for years of love and sacrifice? Children listening delightedly to your dulcet tones doing as they're asked first time, speaking to each other, and you would polite conversation and thoughtful selflessness? For endless volunteers to wash dishes make lunch vacuum stairs?

No, no?

Expectation versus reality.

But of course, Mother's Day can also be weighted with other unrealised expectations. There are those here today who are grieving their own mothers no longer with us. There are those who'd love to be mothers, those who are still on a painful journey with infertility. There are those who never wanted to be a mother and those who are finding motherhood exhausting, lonely or difficult. There are those whose children aren't with them, through death or separation or distance. They're are those who didn't know their mothers or whose mothers weren't there for them, or with whom their relationship has broken down.

Motherhood can be a freighted (*burdensome*) thing. So however you're feeling today, whether Mother's day is a happy day, a sad day, or a mixed day with all the complexities of all kinds of different situations and emotions. You are welcome here and seen here.

Today, that first part of the reading that we heard is not actually directly about mothers, but about children, something mothers tend to be quite concerned with. It's a hugely

important episode in Jesus's life and ministry. But one that can often be spiritualized away from its full meaning. Now, when I started, I wished you a Happy Mother's Day and I did that purposely. When I first moved to this country quite a few years ago, I was told in no uncertain terms, that here it's called Mothering Sunday, and the term Mother's Day was an unwelcome American import.

Mothering Sunday, this particular high horse pontificated was originally about returning to one's mother or home church when working away in service. And this is indeed the origin of Mothering Sunday, back in medieval times, when children as young as six or seven, were sent away from home to work, and were permitted to come home once during the middle of Lent.

So as an institution validating, enabling and perpetuating the institution of child exploitation, I'll let you decide whether that has more going for it than Mother's Day. In any case, Mothering Sunday largely fell out of use perhaps as child labour laws became stricter. And it wasn't until the 1800s in West Virginia that a day for women began to take shape. And Reeves Jarvis in the aftermath of the American Civil War, began to set up Mother's Day work clubs and mother's friendships day, promoting health, skill, learning, education, peace and reconciliation. After a lifetime was seen and Kissy, her daughter, and Anna Jarvis finally succeeded in her mother's ambition to create a day to honour mothers and the sacrifices that they made. Anna who herself never married or had children argued that virtually every other holiday celebrated a man's work or achievement, and there ought to be one day for women. And so the first Mother's Day was celebrated in 1908.

It wasn't long however, before the before commercialism began to creep into Mother's Day, as florists, confectioner's and card companies began to see money making opportunities.

Anna was furious. A quote from her said 'a printed card means nothing except that you are too lazy to write to the woman who has done more for you than anyone in the world.'

Jarvis campaigned tirelessly against the commercialisation of Mother's Day, even getting arrested at a protest against it, and ended up spending her whole considerable fortune suing the American government for the cessation of the holiday.

Mothering Sunday in this country was revived from its medieval roots when a woman named Constance Penwick Smith, seeing the success of the American holiday began a similar campaign for the recognition of mothers, but on the day previously celebrated as part of the Lentern calendar. Now, why have I told you all this other than to set the record straight about Mothering Sunday, Mother's Day, thereby vindicating my heritage and nation?

Well, it's because Mother's Day in its original form was the exact opposite of the saccharin commercial Instagrammable day that it has very much become.

Mother's Day was about recognising and listening to those who are otherwise voiceless. Mother's Day was about prioritising and highlighting peace, education and sacrifice. Mother's Day was about valuing caring work, domestic work, unpaid work. Mother's Day was about overthrowing the patriarchy.

As a side note, when Tom asked me to preach on this, he said he imagined I deal with a topic like Mother's Day, sensitively and tactfully, so I don't know if he's going to regret this one. But stay with me. To put it in terms that we might be more familiar with: the original Mother's Day was about valuing and blessing those who are vulnerable, overlooked, and disadvantaged. Just like the first Mother's Day the original impact and meaning of our scripture passage today is all about valuing and blessing those who are vulnerable, overlooked and disadvantaged.

So, as a nod to good old Constance, the UK Reviver of Mothering Sunday, who I think maybe just wanted a chance to eat chocolate in Lent, I'd like to tell you the story of this passage through three chocolate bars. The first is this: the Yorkie. its PR department has since entered more enlightened times, but Yorkie used to market itself with the catchphrase, 'not for girls'. And similarly, in this passage, we find Jesus's disciples trying to keep Jesus for just one group of people to the exclusion of another. Verse 15 says,

'people who were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them; when the disciples saw this, they rebuked them.'

Jesus is in the middle of a long and significant teaching session, primarily for his closest disciples, but also encompassing all those who'd come to listen, among whom are some of the most important religious leaders of the day.

It's not hard to imagine the scene, Jesus with his inner circle of disciples around him, balancing the jostling crowd and the presence and the scrutiny of the Pharisees.

So when some parents come up with some babies and small children, simply for Jesus to put his hands on them and bless them, doesn't take too much mental aerobics, to imagine that the disciples just don't have much time for that.

Surely, they can see that Jesus is much too busy, much too important to do something as trivial as take time out of an important sermon to hold some babies and talk to some children.

The texts even uses the word 'rebuked'. The disciples rebuked them for distracting Jesus was such a task.

And it rings true, doesn't it? provided there are no cameras or no phones for photo opportunities, how many of our world leaders, celebrities or influential people, can you imagine stopping their campaigns, their interviews, their jobs, mid flow simply to spend time with children, and to truly listen and talk with them?

Even in our own lives? How often do our children get the dregs of our time, when other important things clamour for our attention? I have to confess that even as I was writing this very sermon, literally about making time for children, I found myself waving my own children away because I had an important and time sensitive job to do.

Praise the Lord, they showed me the irony of that situation and I closed my laptop and gave them my full attention. But it's not hard to slip into the disciples way of thinking. Important things important people, important jobs.

Like our Yorkie bars we so often decide our our time is for important things to the exclusion of other seemingly less important things.

Jesus, however, is sending the world 'Curly Wurly'

Verse 16 says, 'But Jesus called the children to him and said, Let the children come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.'

Like Mother's Day, this passage often gets the 'twee' treatment, doesn't it? We paint lovely pictures and pastel colors of Jesus with a crowd of children around him. We trot it out at baptisms and talk of childlike faith.

But I want to take off those pastel glasses today. I want us to look very, very closely at what's going on in this exchange between Jesus, children and their parents. Because I think it's one of the least twee passages there is. I think this passage is about a reversal of worldly order, about the upside down nature of Jesus's kingdom, about valuing and blessing those who are vulnerable, overlooked and disadvantaged.

Let's just hear Jesus's words again, Let the little children come to Me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

Jesus says that the kingdom of God, the rule and reign of Christ, the now and not yet blessing, belongs to children, and to those who are like them.

We so quickly jump to the spiritualisation of those words, don't we, to how we must all have childlike faith, to have a childlike faith and that meaning is definitely here in the text. But there's also something much more immediate, something much more physical and temporal and earthy going on.

When I was having to think about this talk, and specifically which chocolate bars best illustrated its meaning, I asked my children, Rhoda and Silas and one of their friends who was over for tea, what their thoughts are, they're they're six and nine, my children. I said in the reading, Jesus tells us that we have to be like children to get into heaven.

All three of them burst into a wide eyed laughter. And one of them said, You mean, adults have to become naughty and rude, like children? Awesome.

And do you know what? It really made me think, because whenever I've heard this passage talked about, it has always been about how we need to be trusting or open or accepting or non judgmental and I'm sure those are all traits that are included in becoming a like, like a child in our faith.

Jesus doesn't actually say those things, he doesn't spell them out. He doesn't say be like a child when they're open or trusting or cute or quiet. But don't be like a child when they're naughty or rude or loud or frustrating. He just says that the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. And to those like them.

He stopped his serious teaching. He moved aside the adults, and he loved and blessed those particular children.

And why is that so important? It's important because Jesus is turning the world 'Curly Wurly'. He's reversing the worldly order, he's valuing and blessing those who are often vulnerable, overlooked and disadvantaged. This passage shows us that Jesus is concerned with, loves and prioritises actual physical children, and not just when they're open and trusting and cute and quiet, but when they're naughty and rude, and loud and frustrating, and he wants us to love and prioritise them to.

He wants us to value them for themselves, for their own faith, their own spirituality, not just what we can gain from their hypothetical example.

The famous evangelist D. L. Moody once returned from a meeting and reported two and a half conversions. Two adults and a child, I suppose his hosts asked? No, said Moody,

two children and an adult. The children gave their whole lives, the adult only had half of his left to give.

Now Moody may have been slightly tongue in cheek, but he was making the same point about children that Jesus makes.

When Jesus says in verse 17, 'Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God, like a little child will never enter it.' He's teaching that children and young people are not just waiting to grow into proper believers. They are full participants in the kingdom of heaven and examples to all of us in their faith.

I doubt if there is a parent who will walk through these doors today, who has not experienced the pain of their children being shushed or glared at or reprimanded in some church, somewhere. Who has not felt the same rebuke that the disciples gave to the parents in this passage.

I wonder how many more parents there are who never brought their children back to church afterward.

And the same goes for those who don't always fit the mold. Those who through background, disability, situation, culture, or personality don't fit into a quiet, still, arriving on time, mold.

It's important, because this and this is the absolute crux of what I think God wants to speak to us about today. Because who we make time for, who we stop for, who we consider and welcome, who we provide access to, and provision for, says more about the state of our hearts and the heart of our church than any number of sermons that we might hear or doctrines we might recite.

Let the little children come to Me, and do not hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. It means submitting our time, our preferences, our comfort, even sometimes those things that we find most spiritually fulfilling, in order to value and bless those who might be vulnerable, overlooked and disadvantaged.

The last chocolate bar that helps us hear what this passage today is saying, on Mother's Day, is a Snickers bar. Or as you might remember it from years ago, a Marathon bar. And a Marathon bar reminds us that these actions and attitudes that we've been talking about today weren't ever just meant for one day of the year.

Allowing Jesus to change us and overthrow the power structures in our hearts, our church and our world is a pursuit that we can recommit ourselves to every day of our lives. It means ruthlessly identifying and rooting out selfishness and pettiness and unseating ourselves from the throne of our lives, so that Jesus might instead be enthroned.

It means making our church a place where those who are vulnerable, overlooked and disadvantaged, are valued and blessed. And it means taking our word formed, Jesus tinted vision into the world where injustice and hatred and distress are changed, influenced and overthrown by a 'curly wurly' kingdom of heaven.

Now, I don't want to give the game away. But today, all the women here will receive beautiful flowers, which is one way that we are physically showing our appreciation and thanks for all that you do and all that you are.

But today, I'd also like to give everyone a curly wurly to remind us how Mother's Day fits in with Jesus's exhortation in this passage, that we might all remember our own place and purpose in his curly wurly kingdom.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for Mother's Day and the chance to celebrate our own mothers and the sacrifices and service that mothers give. And Lord, thank you for this passage in which you welcomed children that you overturned the worldly expectations. And Lord, I pray that you would be enthroned in our hearts and that we would have your vision for the upside down Kingdom. In your name we pray, Amen.