

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 59”
Matthew 19:13-15

It's quite a while now since I did my teacher training and there are very few things that I consciously remember from that year. One is that it's always a good idea to have a packet of *Fisherman's Friends* in your pocket during the winter. Another is a section from a book on the sociology of the school to the effect that the most influential person in the school is the caretaker (or Senior Estates Manager as he or she would now be called). And the third is a sentence from the 1967 Plowden Report, which was still an important work at that time – “*At the heart of the education system is the child*”. A fellow student, who became a colleague in my first school, always said that that was the case because the child was the one you hit!

And at the heart of the short story we've read this morning from Matthew's account of Jesus' life is a child. We were all children once, but I'm sure our attitude to them changes as we make our way through life. As one writer put it, “*You can learn many things from children. How much patience you have, for instance.*” They are a source of joy and of pain, of fun and of frustration. A lot of sentimental claptrap is talked about children – mainly by grandmothers who didn't have a good word for the little creatures when they first had to cope with them. It's always interesting watching grandmothers and ageing great-aunts fighting over who is going to let the child sit on their knee, when forty years ago they would have been desperate for anyone to take the child off their knee for a few moments.

Of course, the inconsistencies are not confined to the older generation. Don't you find it strange that a child who will not even touch a beefburger in a bun at home will, within the space of a few short but expensive minutes, devour mountains of the things if you have to pay £2.50 each for them at MacDonald's? And all that stuff about how beautiful they look when they're little – Fran Lebowitz summed it up by saying: “*All God's children are not beautiful. Most of God's children are, in fact, barely presentable.*”

Nevertheless, some people love them and some are rather more ambivalent in their attitude to them. There are those who would spend all their waking hours with children – almost exclusively those who never have to, it seems. And there are those who see them as a bit of an intrusion really. They're the little creatures that stop you having a good time, stop you going out to work, mess up your tidy home, get in the way when there are visitors around. So you can shunt them off to the day nursery or get a nanny or kind grandparent in to do the messy bits. As I said, we were all children once, so it's funny that there are so many different attitudes to them.

Jesus' closest followers – the disciples – seemed to regard the children who came to Jesus as a bit of an intrusion. It's not too surprising, really, as children had little or no status at that time. They were simply a responsibility, a necessary stage to go through in the regeneration of the human race – certainly nothing to spend too much time taking seriously (at least, not for men). So when a group of people came along wanting Jesus to bless their little offspring, the disciples rather rudely told them to get lost. Jesus was far too important and far too busy to be bothered with them.

Jesus, however, loved the little children just as much as he loved everyone else. He welcomed them with open arms and showed his indignation at the disciples' heavy-handed attitude. In fact, as always, he used the occasion to go on and make some important points about life in the Kingdom of God using the example of the children. What he is saying here in this story once again reminds us about the values and attitudes of the Kingdom he had come to inaugurate, and reiterates what we read at the beginning of chapter 18, when the disciples were trying to ascertain who's be the top dog in this coming Kingdom. It must be something we need to hear more than once, if Matthew has included it twice in his record of Jesus' words. I suspect we're all guilty in some way of worrying about status. You'll remember that this Kingdom, of which Jesus offers us glimpses here in Matthew's gospel, is the Kingdom – the renewed and restored creation – that the Hebrew prophets foretold. Jesus has spoken of and demonstrated in action this Kingdom and offered the opportunity of being part of it to anyone who wants to take it seriously. The implications of that are that those who want to follow his way must be prepared to give up their own agenda for life and must trust Jesus for his new way.

The point being made here is that anyone who wants to have a part in the life of the Kingdom must become like a little child – *“the Kingdom of heaven [or God] belongs to such as these.”* There is a need for us to approach the life of the Kingdom with a **childlike** (not **childish**) attitude. It's all about status and power again. Something has to happen to our attitudes if we are to return to that state of childlikeness that will enable us to be full participants in its life.

Once again, a lot of tosh is talked about what Jesus is saying here. People make a lot of the innocence of children – obviously never having watched one for more than about thirty seconds. Children are not innocent: they are as scheming and selfish as any adult. Hilaire Belloc wrote a number of long poems about naughty children and at the beginning of his *Bad Child's Book of Beasts* he writes: *“I call you bad, my little child,/Upon the title page,/Because a manner rude and wild/Is common at your age.”* Let's be honest, there is nothing innocent about a child.

Neither are children terribly naïve and trusting in every circumstance, as many other people say. *“O what a tangled web do parents weave?/When they think their children are naïve”*, write Ogden Nash. We're

not talking here about uncorrupted little angels, any more than we are able to enter the Kingdom of God simply through our own innocence and uncynical trust.

Jesus is talking here again – as he did in that earlier section (18:1-6) – about status. He's talking about how we must come to terms with the fact that we have no more status than a child when we come to the Kingdom of God. The disciples, as we have seen, shooed the children away from Jesus because they were intrusive, not worth worrying about. The disciples were grown-ups, and they were jealous of their time and standing with Jesus. Why should Jesus give attention to these little ones who, after all, had no rights and no productive contribution to make to society? Jesus should be spending time with **them**, the people who had something to offer, who were experienced, who could understand – people with status, with position, who were part of the Kingdom that Jesus was always talking about.

Oh no, says Jesus: these little kids have got it right. If you really want to be someone in the Kingdom of God, you've got to give up all that talk and become like a little child. You've got to relinquish your hold on status and accept it all with a kind of humility. And that is as difficult for us today as it was for those disciples then. In fact, in this topsy-turvy secular society of ours, it's well nigh impossible. Everything is about status in some way or other. How often do you see the little phrase in small print at the bottom of your insurance policy, your credit agreement, your application for this, that or the other – "*Subject to status*"? There, of course, it means, "If you've got enough money". But it can mean all sorts of other things as well in different circumstances.

In all areas of life we have our pecking orders – and our desire to move up that order as swiftly and efficiently as possible. You may remember that classic sketch by John Cleese, Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett (I tried to find a snip of it to show this morning) in which the three men look up to or down on each other. And church is no exception to that. Our status seems to be dependent on all manner of things – how long we've been here, what committees we're on, what our day job is, how often we pray out loud – all kinds of daft things. And if you ever end up in some kind of ecumenical do at the Cathedral your eyes will be opened even wider as you gaze upon the serried ranks of Anglican hierarchical figures. You'd need a pretty thick guide book to find your way through the ranks of status and privilege in some corners of the Kingdom of God!

But Jesus says that it doesn't mean a thing in his eyes. If you want to be a part of this Kingdom of God, then you'd better get used to the idea that it's all about acceptance, not about status. That's why Jesus is so accepting of the children here – in contrast to the attitude of the disciples.

1. ACCEPTING YOUR OWN POSITION

So often we find ourselves jockeying for position – and for other people’s positions much of the time. Why do we have this craving to be better, greater, more popular than anyone else? Those disciples had it, didn’t they? They wanted to know who was going to be greatest in the Kingdom. Well, says Jesus, you just need to accept your humble position, like a child does. A good deal of the pressure and tension of contemporary life, I believe, comes from our unwillingness to accept who we are and what we’ve got. We are always comparing ourselves with others, in terms of possessions, in terms of appearance, in terms of status, in terms of piety – always looking over our shoulders and trying to keep up with or ahead of the Joneses. That attitude stinks. It wears you out, it brings you down, it messes you up. There’s no place in the Kingdom of God for that kind of hassle, that kind of envy.

Why do we have this craving? It’s part of our sinful nature, I reckon. And it’s a weapon that the devil uses to destroy our effectiveness as God’s witnesses. This selfish competitiveness is what tears us apart; it’s what breeds suspicion amongst the people of God: it’s what leaves us devoid of strength and enthusiasm because we are always more concerned about what others think of us than about what God thinks. As soon as I was ordained, I stuck up on the wall above my desk (and it’s still there) some words from *1 Thessalonians 2:4*: “*We speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men, but God who tests our hearts.*” It’s been a great encouragement – and a great relief – to know that I don’t have to keep trying to win other people’s approval, I don’t have to keep trying for status. But it’s still very, very difficult..

2. ACCEPTING OTHER PEOPLE

If we are secure in the knowledge that God loves us whatever our position, whatever our status, then we should have no difficulty accepting other people in the Kingdom of God, whatever their position or background. We won’t want to look down on some who don’t seem to have quite the same outlook on life that we do. And we won’t constantly be envying those who appear, according to some indicators, to be more successful than we are. Young children are remarkably adept at accepting other people without asking questions about their view on this issue or that, without finding out what they do for a living or how many bedrooms they have or how much their new conservatory cost. Any wrong attitudes they do have on that score are usually inculcated in them by their status-sensitive parents.

In the Kingdom of God we need to get to the point of accepting all those whom God chooses to invite in along with us. That may well call for great efforts of humility, it will call for the putting aside of

prejudices, it will mean demonstrations of love which may be very difficult for us. Jesus says we must be like little children if we wish to have anything to do with the Kingdom. A lot of old habits have to go out of the window and a great deal of what the world regards as wisdom has to be discarded as being completely at odds with the values and principles of the Kingdom of God.

3. ACCEPTING THE GIFT

What gift? Well, Jesus says that “*the Kingdom of heaven **belongs** to such as these*” and in Mark’s version of this little episode talks about “*receiving the Kingdom of God*”. Our opportunity to participate in the life of the Kingdom of God is a gift offered to us by Jesus. He wants us to reach out and take it humbly and thankfully, just as a child would. We don’t have to do anything before we can accept it, other than realise our need of it. Jesus has sorted out all the entrance qualifications, he has smoothed the way for us to go in. But anyone who thinks they can somehow earn or merit their entry into the Kingdom, or can claim it as a right, is sadly mistaken.

Once again this morning, the offer is there for those who want to accept, for those who are prepared to put aside the preoccupations with status and position that are characteristic of the world around us, for those who are ready to accept others on equal terms. Jesus died on the cross so that you could have a place in the Kingdom of God, and he asks nothing more of you than that you accept his offer and grow to live in his way. Are you childlike enough to do that?

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Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think the disciples were so eager to get rid of the children? In what ways might we be like that? (Think in terms of society at large and of the church.)
2. In what ways do you think we might have swung to the other extreme in today's culture? (Go on, parade your prejudices!)
3. What kind of things signify status in society generally? In the church?
4. Why is there no place for status in the Kingdom of God?
5. How can we learn to be childlike? How can we help each other in that?

6. Is there any particular thing you have learned from this passage?