

# Childish Saviour

Jeremiah 11:18-20

James 3:13-4:3; 7-8

Mark 9:30-37

Consider the word "Child". What does it stir in you?

A child is needy, requiring protection. Perhaps you think of their noise as disruptive or their impatience as tiresome. Perhaps you find the sound of their play and chatter endearing, making you wistful for more innocent times in your life. Maybe their questions are funny, unsettling and irritating by turns. Children can be fiercely competitive or tenderly caring. Their speed of learning can amaze. Children are observant. Their simplicity of ideas can be easily patronised. A child is powerless, politically, yet their capacity to disrupt is sometimes enormous. One thing is sure: we were all children once.

It's worth spending time with the word "child" before trying to work out why Jesus compared himself with a child, setting one in the midst of embarrassed grown up disciples saying that if they welcome a child like this, they welcome Jesus.

Jesus has been teaching them the most grown up things: certificate 18, adult viewing, violent prediction of his political betrayal, execution and resurrection. Their response is bewilderment, then "let's talk about something else." On the road, they've been arguing about which of them is the greatest. What a terribly grown up question. But then their embarrassed silence when Jesus asks what they were talking about proves they know they were wrong, and reveals comically how juvenile their male competitiveness is in reality. For Jesus then to place himself in the role of child is hilarious reversal which pulls the rug from under their childish attempts to assert their grown-up-ness.

He is giving them an antidote to false adulthood, and teaching them real adulthood: If you are ready to offer protection to the vulnerable, if you have the impulse to listen to the awkward question, if your heart is ready to play, if you are willing to have your grown up agenda disrupted, if you can't help speaking up for the voiceless, and are ready to teach and empower the voiceless to find their voice, if you can't help caring for a child, even when they're capricious, naughty or downright selfish, then you are in a condition to be receptive to God. The kind of human who draws near to a child to welcome, protect and listen and play, is the kind of human who gets God. The same can be said of church.

Jesus, like Jeremiah, warns about the trouble out there, with other people posing a threat. The disciples then rather tactlessly argue internally about themselves. Jesus then makes them look *inside* and see if there is health in *them*. James, meanwhile, fiercely gazes inside to see, whatever the supposedly grown up world is doing out there, how is their own integrity, compassion and spirituality?

James explores this interior life with fiercer language (see 4:1-2).

Who is the greatest? The one with the cleverest espionage and technical ability? The one with the biggest weapons? The one with the righteous rhetoric about defending democracy against terrorism? The one with the most effective social media election campaign?

The hilarious reversals in our encounter with Jesus and his disciples, and James' unblinking glare at competitiveness and envy open our eyes to see just how juvenile competitiveness is, and to call out how horrendously destructive it can be. A bully with a nuclear arsenal is a juvenile, deadly bully.

As Galilee was bombed last night, and the State of Israel is attacked by Iran, Yemen and Jordan having in turn blown up thousands of hand held communications devices across their borders, we witness the depths of human envy and competitive provocation. We pray very much this week for the terrifying adult world of technology, war and conflict, where unbearably juvenile behaviour by adults with power has deadly consequences. We realise James is quite mild in his description. He is distressed, though, that such behaviour is still happening in the young church that supposedly trusts Jesus.

But Jeremiah, Jesus and James all ask us to consider, even if the world is terrible, the thing we can do something about is the health of our own humanity and faithfulness. Jesus' injunction to welcome children and become proper adults is also an invitation to recover childhood. He isn't asking us to adopt a fixed role, but to enter into the exchange of identities; his playful reversal helps us to see and name the reversals and contradictions that lead to destruction, and the pathetic competitiveness that leads to war. We must pray for wisdom in the management of internet and social media, for all parents and schools anxious about its reach, and for children and young people troubled by what they encounter there. We must be adult as we manage the technological world, but adults who listen to children about it, and ask what it means to "welcome" a child there.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the Church of England has spent a lot of energy trying to insist we're still an important adult in the room. We should still be setting the agenda about family. The church was, at best, grumpy when a prime minister took the initiative without asking us to extend civil partnership, then marriage to same sex couples. We're no longer the default setting for funeral directors to call. Is that something to be sad or relieved about? We have been able to be the strategic thinking Pharisees for centuries, setting the social agenda and largely controlling behaviour. But that is hardly a recipe for compassion. Compassion, like a child, is fundamentally reactive. It is tactical, if you like, rather than strategic. It reacts to, rather than controls direction on the field of battle, to use a violent analogy for life. As we prepare to give thanks for the hundreds of weddings that have happened in this building over 160 years,<sup>1</sup> we will also celebrate the precious handful of celebrations for same sex couples we have been privileged to host. Then we lament how few. Our festival will make visible the absence of so many: those divorced, not allowed to marry here for more than a century; those not blessed; those still not permitted to be married. But here we lament and confess this hopefully, because we are determinedly on the way to being able to do so. Elements of the Church thought they were being grown up defending the family against such change, but suddenly the grown-ups on that subject were the conservative politicians we might tend to patronise. If marriage is so good, said David Cameron, why not share it with more people? The Church of England exposed herself as having a shallow and mean understanding of marriage, not from first principles enjoying the realities marriage offers; rather thinking marriage's brittle moral superiority depended on some people not having it. Self-appointed church spokespeople resented no longer being the strategists. It was an uncomfortable reversal.

But Jesus said to the bickering disciples, if you welcome a child, you welcome me. He was not in that moment claiming to be the grown up in the room. What if the church, where we bicker amongst ourselves, stops trying to be competitive adult and relaxes for a while into the status of child? What if we are released into playfulness again, and instead of anxiously trying to prove we should be near the head of the table, in the Cabinet, directing policy, setting the moral agenda for society, we become the little ones who ask the awkward questions? What if it turns out we're meant to be the disruptive ones whose play (or worship), or untimely demands for food – not for ourselves, perhaps, but for asylum seekers, say – threaten to de-rail the grown ups' agenda?

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<sup>1</sup> A Festival of All Saints Weddings was to be held the following weekend.

What if our imaginative play makes us consider possibilities the grown up world wouldn't dream of? Possibilities the secular world has forgotten how to dream of? We were all children once. Indeed, when we do respond generously to the subversive company of a child, we remember the child within us is still there, and may be the aspect of us most receptive to God. Our protection of them allows *them* unwittingly to protect our humanity.

Perhaps some of you remember the All Age Service we held here the week Britain's grown up government decided to bomb Syria. Led by children, we build beautiful cities with wooden bricks right here. We then destroyed each other's cities. Some adults cried. But then we said some prayers, and the unplanned moment became the most memorable, dazzling moment of our worship: when we opened our eyes we discovered that the youngest children had begun rebuilding the cities. They were dreaming the unthinkable. Perhaps the Church is called to stand with Christ, not presuming to be adult, but more like a child. "Draw near to God and God will draw near to you," James says...then with glee: "and the Devil will flee." It is the child who gets God first. It is the adult who welcomes a child who also embraces God. We are called to be better adults and better children at the same time. That way lies the peace that so eludes us.

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