

Sunday 22 September - Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Sermon by Wendy Borgartz

An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Chapter 9 of Mark's Gospel begins with the transfiguration. Jesus only took Peter, James and John up the mountain with him. I wonder how the other disciples felt at being left out of something so amazing. Even if Peter, James and John followed Jesus's instruction to tell nobody about it, so they didn't know what happened, there is still an element of division between the disciples, human nature being what it is they may have seen it as favouritism by Jesus.

This is the backdrop to the squabbling between the disciples over who was the greatest. Perhaps because those who did not witness the transfiguration were unhappy about that. Or maybe it was the three, Peter, James & John who had been there who were puffed up with their own importance and telling the others they were more important because Jesus had taken them up the mountain with him. Maybe they made Jesus think of children arguing in the playground, perhaps they were pushing and shoving each other, using hurtful words. Whatever the reason, Jesus brings forward a small child and tells them that 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

I have been working with children at St Luke's for 24 years now – when I began our youngest was crawling around on the floor, he is now 25. I have always found this verse immensely supportive when working with children and young people. Children, even in the twenty-first century, are still largely unheard, they are always being told how to behave and what to do, they have no real autonomy from adults, indeed we would consider that unsafe. Children are also vulnerable, yet Jesus came to earth as a tiny vulnerable baby and grew up as a human. Children nowadays have less freedom than many of us enjoyed when we were children, when we were allowed to go out on our bikes or on foot, roaming the countryside, playing with friends and having fun. Instead, our children are kept close to home, where adults can supervise them and know they are safe, they are taken everywhere by car, the roads are too busy and dangerous to allow them to cycle by themselves. This is because we recognize their vulnerability. In Jesus's day, the children, as now, had to do what they were told to do and although we might nowadays consider children to be important, in Jesus's day they had

the least status in the family. Yet Jesus is telling the disciples that they need to welcome children and view them as important.

There is something about the way children see the world around them and accept Jesus that is very different to the way we behave as adults. They can, and do, ask all kinds of questions that are not always easy to answer, especially in language that a child can understand so avoiding all the church jargon and long words we sometimes use. I was reminded of a letter written by Rowan Williams when he was Archbishop of Canterbury to a six-year-old girl who had asked her father who invented God, and which the father sent to Lambeth Palace. I read about this in a book I have recently purchased on Children in the Bible by Anne Richardson. I haven't had time to read all of the book as yet, but I want to read Rowan Williams' response to you.

“Dear Lulu, Your dad has sent on your letter and asked if I have any answers. It's a difficult one! But I think God might reply a bit like this:-

Dear Lulu – Nobody invented me – but lots of people discovered me and were quite surprised. They discovered me when they looked round at the world and thought it was really beautiful or really mysterious and wondered where it came from. They discovered me when they were very very quiet on their own and felt a sort of peace and love they hadn't expected.

Then they invented ideas about me – some of them sensible and some of them not very sensible. From time to time I sent them some hints – specially in the life of Jesus – to let them get closer to what I'm really like.

But there was nothing and nobody around before me to invent me. Rather like somebody who writes a story in a book, I started making up the story of the world and eventually invented human beings like you who could ask me awkward questions.

And then he'd send you lots of love and sign off.

I know he doesn't usually write letters, so I have to do the best I can on his behalf. Lots of love from me too.

+Archbishop Rowan.”

When I read this, my thought was how amazing that someone as important as the Archbishop of Canterbury would find the time to write to a little girl who had asked a difficult question about God. But then I looked at the Gospel reading this morning and what Jesus was telling his disciples, and

can't help but feel that Archbishop Rowan was acting in the way Jesus was telling the disciples they needed to act, by not worrying about who is important, by not getting caught up in the way the world views people and their relative importance to each other, but instead by turning it on its head and making the time to deal with the people who are not considered important instead.

Jesus is challenging us, as much as his original disciples, to remember that we are here to serve others and that in God's kingdom 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' We need to remember that God sees things differently to the way they are set out in our world, that the vulnerable, the poor, the unimportant, the homeless, the refugees, the children, the sick are those we are here to serve in the name of Jesus, not those who are wealthy or hold high status jobs or positions in our society. Just because we are Christians, we know we are not better than anyone else and that our role is to love God and love our neighbour and try to act more as Jesus did.

So, I pray that in the week ahead we may all find time to value someone or some place that our society at large does not value, remembering how God's world is upside down to our world. And when we do show that value to someone the world considers unimportant, remember that we are valuing and showing welcome to both Jesus and God in that action.

Amen