

Morningside

14/01/2018

1 Samuel 3: 1-10.

Mark 9: 36-37

“The child is in the midst”. To discuss our theme this evening I have with me three guests. The first is Sir Joshua Reynolds, most famous portrait painter of his day, born nearly three hundred years ago. Sir Joshua, one of the paintings for which you are still remembered is “The Infant Samuel at Prayer”. As recently as fifty years ago, many children will have seen this painting illustrating their Children’s Bibles, and it will have made it easy to remember the story from the Bible which it depicts. We can all see it this morning. Tell me about the painting.

*Thank you for giving me the opportunity. When people see the painting first they think of it as a portrait of innocence; and sweet and touching it is. But I want them to see deeper, and to see that this is no ordinary child, and that this is no ordinary situation. To feel the power of my painting, you need to remember the story: and probably in my day people were more familiar with the Bible’s story of the Infant Samuel than they are today.*

*When Samuel slept in the Temple he was called by God. I hope you see in my painting the strength of the faith of the little boy. But I hope you see in the dark clouds of night which form the background to the child’s face the menace and the gloom of the situation of the day. Samuel is called by God in a time of spiritual desolation and religious corruption and political danger and social upheaval. Not only that: I hope people see in my picture a hint of the great and weighty task to which Samuel is being called.*

*God is not merely calling Samuel to hear his voice and know his presence. He is calling Samuel to be a prophet. At the very moment when it seems no-one hears the voice of God this child is being*

*summoned out of darkness into light. That he might listen and tell what is the will of God. It will be a word of Judgment and a word of command which Samuel will have to bring. What will make this little child strong enough for that mighty task? That is what was in my mind when I painted this picture.*

“The child is in the midst”. My next guest is Dr Nadine Burke Harris. Who are you and what do you do?

*I am a children’s doctor in California. Every day I see children that I know, I know, will have terrible health prospects when they grow up. They suffer exposure to something that makes them three times more likely than other children to have heart disease, three times more likely than other children to have lung cancer; and their life expectancy will be twenty years less than the United States average. When I did my training in public health I learned that if one hundred children drink from the same well and 98 develop diarrhoea, science tells you not to keep prescribing antibiotics but to turn off the well. The great public health threat I’m talking about is childhood trauma. We need to deal with childhood trauma. What happens to children in the early years determines the health of a nation. That is what I understand by “the child is in the midst”.*

Strong words, Dr Burke Harris. What do you mean by childhood trauma? *I am completely convinced by the scientific evidence which suggests that adult health is statistically predictable in terms of adverse childhood experience. If you have suffered physical or emotional neglect as a child, if you have suffered physical or emotional abuse as a child, if you have lived with a family member with an addiction problem or with a mental health problem – the more of these adverse childhood experiences you have had the more likely it is that you will develop not just depression or other mental illnesses, which you could understand,*

*but also, as I said, the great killers of Western society, heart disease and cancer.*

Come, come. Surely this is just bad behaviour. If you have a brutal childhood you are more likely to smoke and have anger problems. That's all you are saying. *No! I am saying something much more scientific. The medical evidence is quite clear. Even without any bad behaviour at all in adult life, people with a high number of ACEs will be likely to live an average of twenty years less than others. The child is in the midst in the sense that the more we can do to prevent, to screen and to heal the effects of childhood trauma the more dramatically we will improve the health of a nation.*

My third guest to talk about “the child is in the midst” is Mark. Who are you and what do you do? *I am a gospel writer. I only wrote one, but all the others learned from me, because I was the first person to write down the story of the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The story I want to talk about is in the middle of my book: it is a story about Jesus and a child. You need to know what was happening to the twelve. The disciples were having a bad time. Just before this episode I have a story in my book about their complete failure to heal a sick man in Jesus' name followed by Jesus' distress that they have learned nothing from him about how to pray. In spite of all; that, as they walk along the road together they start to argue about which of them is the greatest. You could hardly believe it. They have just had to face up to Jesus telling them that they are not getting even the basics right and there they are – arguing about which one was top disciple. And that is when he took the child. Here is how I told the story in my book:*

*He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever*

*welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*

*These days no-one can understand the shock when Jesus said that, because these days people have romantic ideas about childhood as a privileged time of innocence: but in my day it was very different., In Jesus' time children were non-persons: they should have been kept with the women, not hanging around a teacher and his students. It was inconceivable that receiving a child might have value for adult disciples. But that is what he said and that is what he did. If and when you learn to welcome the least, the very least in my name, you welcome me. What might be the lesson of my story of Jesus and the child to 2018?*

Does that have anything to say to a Scotland where over five thousand children in January 2018 are officially described by government statistics as homeless? Does that have anything to say to a United Kingdom where one child in every three – one third of all children – has experienced bullying online? Does that – these words of Jesus about children – have anything to say to a world in which five million children live in slavery – including some in this country?

The child is in the midst. Take Reynolds' painting home with you and look at it. Remember the argument of the doctor about the effect of adverse childhood experiences: you can watch her on YouTube (TEDTalk Nadine Burke Harris). And take away in your heart the words of Jesus *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.* There is nothing old-fashioned about Jesus.