

‘Valuing children? Amen to that.’

The first word that Jesus says in our Gospel passage this morning is a word we’ve already used several times this morning. The translation from Greek to English that we have heard says ‘Truly I tell you...’: but in Greek, it’s just a four letter, strangely familiar word beginning with ‘A’ – Amen. So, Matthew actually wrote: ‘Amen: unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’. There are several interesting things about those words.

First: Jesus’ followers today and throughout history have used the word ‘Amen’ at the end of prayers to mean ‘Let it be so’ or ‘Yes, I agree’ or ‘This is true for me’. What we see here is Jesus using the word at the beginning of what he says. Saying ‘Amen’ at the beginning of a speech pre-supposes accuracy and authority. It’s a solemn and emphatic way of saying ‘Listen up: this is true, this is right’. And what Jesus authoritatively says is true and right on this occasion is that, to enter the kingdom of heaven, his followers must become like children.

Before we move on, let’s note just one more thing about the text. The disciples ask ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ In so doing they seem to be seeing themselves as insiders. It’s as if they are already in – and, amongst this group of twelve or so testosterone rich young men, they want to know who is top dog, who ranks highest, who is at the top of the discipleship pile in Jesus’ eyes. What Jesus says next is designed to surprise and deflate them. ‘Truly...Amen’ says Jesus ‘You are not in yet: to get in you – you, my current disciples, will have to change. You have to become like this vulnerable, defenceless child: you have to welcome and relate positively to this vulnerable, defenceless child. Then, and only then, will you be able to enter, get in to the kingdom of heaven.’

So: let’s count the words of warning here. First: ‘Amen’ – what Jesus is about to say has the ring and power of God’s truth about it. Second: nothing should be presumed. Just because you are a follower of Jesus now doesn’t mean that everything is sorted. Those whom God sees as being in and belonging to the kingdom of heaven is up to God: and God’s ideas of inclusion may vary greatly from our human ones. Third: it’s no good expecting to stay the same. To be included in God’s kingdom, it’s no good being the person you’ve always been and doing the things you’ve always done. You’ve got to change. ‘Unless you change and become like children’ says Jesus ‘you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’. Strong words – strong words indeed, especially for long-term Christians like many of us who probably think ‘We’ve put a good lot of time in. Surely we’ve done enough praying, caring and serving to have got the T shirt and be on God’s turf. Now it’s just a question of whether we are at the front or the back of the queue to enter the Pearly Gates’.

Listen once more to the command to act which will qualify or disqualify us for future entry into the fulness of God’s love: ‘Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’.

The cardinal features of children at the time that Jesus was speaking and Matthew writing, I suggest, are these: that children were inferior, without status or rights, seen more as ‘property’ than ‘people’ and were never held up as a model for anything. So, unless you become inferior, without status – just in fact as, tellingly, Jesus was at his crucifixion – you...we will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Who then can be saved? How can we be saved? Well, clearly, only by God’s grace. But welcoming children – welcoming a vulnerable, defenceless person such as the one in front of him – is the same, Jesus says, as welcoming him and puts people on the right track for entering and being included in God’s kingdom.

Which is why, over the last few years, we have engaged in developing and adopting new safeguarding procedures for children. It’s why, today, we are keeping this Sunday as Safeguarding Sunday. Welcoming children, paying attention to children, relating to children as people with something to give and from whom to learn is to welcome Jesus. It is to attempt to follow him truly and faithfully.

The 'we' involved in developing and adopting the safeguarding procedures is, of course, a large, wide ranging group of people, including childhood victims of abuse and those who, both inside and outside the church, could and should have known better but allowed power and privilege get the better of them. Here at St Peter's we are attempting not to act only with the wisdom of hindsight. We are engaged, at the invitation and with the encouragement of Bristol Diocese, to welcome and support pro-actively not just children but also other vulnerable people with access, sight, hearing or other issues not just on a one-off basis but as a completely normal and regular part of our life. Two years or so ago the Diocese started its Safe and Welcome Bronze, Silver and Gold Award scheme. This provides a framework, backed up by consultants and training, by which every parish in the Diocese can work towards welcoming and being with all people, whatever their age and capacity, we hope and pray as Jesus would have done and as we would like ourselves to do for Jesus. If you have listened to or read our Notices in the last few weeks, you will know that St Peter's has reached both the Bronze and Silver levels. For this we are deeply indebted to our Parish Safeguarding Officer, Sandy Hollinghurst, who is co-ordinating the initiative and to the members of the Safe and Welcome Team and all the other groups and individuals who are contributing to this 'whole church' approach to Safeguarding and Access thinking and practice. It is meticulous and demanding work, meaning that people need to devote more time to training and to completing and reviewing job descriptions and other things than has previously been the case. As we salute those who have been particularly involved in this work so far, let us pray that everyone of us might play our part – and more of a part, if asked – in developing this welcome further. With everyone involved, with everyone putting their shoulder to the responsibility and privilege of welcoming children and all those requiring safeguarding and access fore-thought, we will achieve more of our current ambitions and deliver a little more fully the St Peter's Vision of Lives transformed by following Christ in love and service. It may help to remind you that our ambitions include achieving the Safe and Welcome Gold Award next year and engaging a Youth Worker to further develop and support our work with young people as soon as possible.

We began this sermon by focusing on one four letter word: Amen. Let's end by focusing on another four letter word and then find a place for Jesus' own word 'Amen' right at the end. The second four letter word I invite you to focus on is 'pray'. Why not pray, today and in the days to come, for God's help to change. Pray for God's Spirit to work inside and around us so that we can break those habits which mean we demean other people. Pray that we might change so as not to look down on others as inferior, but to see them as just as rich in potential in God's eyes as we ourselves are. And as well as praying for ourselves, I ask you to pray for the children and young people of this church, of this community and across the whole country: that adults might relate to them and that they might relate to each other as we see Jesus doing when, radically, he places a child at the centre of the then Christian community and says 'Whoever welcomes one such child, welcomes me'.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, enable in us such change that we may enter and enjoy your kingdom in all its fulness.

Loving God, lead us to see and treasure all children here at St Peter's and further afield as people treasured now by you.

Vulnerable God, inspire us to welcome and walk alongside all those who need support of any kind, whatever their age or position in life: these prayers we ask through Christ our Lord.

Amen.