

*May I speak in the name of God,
beyond us, beside us, and within us*

In season 5 of the animated sitcom *The Simpsons*, there is an episode entitled *Bart's Inner Child*. Bart is the 10-year old son of Homer and Marge Simpson, who live in the American suburb of Springfield. He is a mischievous and rebellious boy, forever disrespecting his elders and getting into trouble. However, in this episode Bart is unexpectedly transformed into an inspirational figure for the entire town when a dubious self-help guru visits Springfield and raises up Bart as an icon of carefree living, who is guided by his feelings rather than by restrictive social rules. *'Be Like the Boy!'*, *'Be Like the Boy!'* the people of Springfield begin to chant, and within a few days everyone is throwing aside their social inhibitions and responsibilities, indulging every feckless whim and refusing to be accountable for their behaviour.

Bart's initial delight at his new god-like status quickly turns sour as he realises that he's lost his distinctive personal identity as the town troublemaker now that everyone else behaves as badly as he does. But by the end of the episode, this chaotic period of lawless carnival quickly comes to a close. As Springfield organises its first annual 'Do What You Feel' festival, disaster strikes when the staging and fairground rides collapse because maintenance workers didn't feel like erecting them properly.

The episode ends as the townsfolk turn upon Bart as the origin of their misfortune and chase him through the town. Normality is restored.

This *Simpsons* episode is a sustained lampooning of vacuous self-help slogans about embracing our inner child as a way of rediscovering innocence and freedom, and it might easily be taken as a mockery of our gospel passage this morning, or at least of certain modern misinterpretations of it. For in first-century Palestine, the social construction of childhood was very different to what it is now, and if we map our modern understandings of childhood onto this gospel reading, we may end up missing its good news.

Today, our popular representations of childhood often rest on the expectation that childhood should be a time of happy innocence. And so when we hear a bible reading like our gospel passage today, we may interpret it as a somewhat syrupy celebration of innocent childhood purity. But this modern view of childhood as a signifier for happy innocence is a remnant of 18th-century Romanticism - the time when the Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote his famous treatise on the education of children based on the premise of innate human goodness, and the Romantic poets such as Blake and Wordsworth promoted the idea that children are born entirely innocent and only become

corrupted through their experience of this dark world.

This 18th-century Romantic view of childhood was in itself a reaction against the Puritan view of childhood that had prevailed in the 16th and 17th centuries following the Reformation. The Puritans believed children were the inheritors of original sin, and so they had an anxious concern about the state of children's souls, which led to the first substantial outpouring of literature aimed specifically at children because of the perceived need for them to be swiftly instructed in the Christian faith to avoid damnation, especially when child mortality rates were still very high.

But the *Gospel of Mark* was written about 1500 years before any of this happened, and prior to the Middle Ages, the concept of childhood as a distinct territory with a character and identity of its own doesn't really seem to have existed. Childhood certainly wasn't an idealised state of being, and – although it made seem strange to us now from the perspective of our post-Freudian era - the experience of children wasn't deemed to be formative of the adults they would become. This is one reason why the gospels tell us so little about Jesus before he begins his public ministry aged 30 – childhood experience simply wasn't seen as very significant or relevant.

There was certainly no concept of children's rights in the ancient world. Among the Greeks and Romans, the practice of infanticide was not unusual according to the historian Plutarch. And while the Jews saw children as a great blessing from God and didn't practice

infanticide, the value of young children was perceived to lie more in their prospective future as faithful adult Israelites rather than in their existence as children themselves.

Although we certainly see occasional glimpses of affectionate relationships between parents and children in scripture and ancient history, for the most part children were roughly on the same social level as slaves, animals and other property. No one was wandering about first-century Palestine telling children that these were the best years of their lives.

So in today's scene of Jesus bringing a little child into the midst of the disciples, the intended symbolism is not so much about innocence as it is about powerlessness, and once we understand that then the connection with the preceding argument between the disciples about who is the greatest begins to make a bit more sense.

Our gospel reading today is another passion prediction. The preoccupying idea in this reading is Jesus's suffering, death and resurrection, and – after Simon Peter kicking off last week after the first passion prediction - Jesus is continuing to try and draw the disciples into a deeper understanding of this mystery.

And once again we see the persistent difficulty in comprehending this teaching because the disciples cannot let go of their conventional ideas of success and status. Left to their own devices, they're still squabbling amongst themselves about which one of them is the greatest, though we can see they've absorbed just enough of Jesus' teaching to be a

bit embarrassed about admitting this, and when Jesus asks what they were arguing about then there's an awkward silence as they all look at their sandals.

But being the maddeningly perceptive Son of God, of course Jesus sees what they've been talking about, and so he gathers them together for a teaching moment.

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" says Jesus, and then he invites a nearby child into the midst of his ambitious disciples. And we know that the child symbolises the notion of servanthood and low social status because the word that Mark uses for child is the same word as that used for 'child' in the Greek version of the *Book of Isaiah*, when it speaks of heralding the mysterious suffering servant by whose wounds we shall be healed.

So the child becomes a metaphor for adult discipleship, and another way in which Jesus represents the necessity for his followers to renounce the dominant value system of the world, and to first step into a position of weakness and dependency if we are to fully receive God's gift and grace.

Reinforcing once again the message that, in the life of faith, power, status and riches are probably more likely to be a disadvantage than a bonus.

There can be a benefit to being as powerless and dependent as a child to the extent that it opens us up to a deeper reliance upon God, and to entrust ourselves to God's mercy and care.

Whereas conversely, *'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.'* because when we're bolstered up with wealth, and status, and social regard, it can make it a bit harder for God to get through to us. The more comfortable and assured we become in our social esteem and our worldly resources, then the less need there will likely be for us to trust ourselves to the mercy and grace of God.

The child becomes another expression of the mysterious interrelationship of humility and empowerment that we keep seeing throughout the gospel. The Almighty God sets aside divine power to be incarnated as a fragile human baby through whom all creation will be reconciled; Mary consents to Gabriel's formidable invitation to bear the Christ child and in doing so becomes ennobled; Jesus goes willingly to death on the Cross and is thus raised in glory.

And we are each of us invited to lay aside our self-interest in order to discover our true selves hidden in Christ. The journey of Christian discipleship begins with an act of surrender that comes from a realisation of our human powerlessness, our helpless complicity in the oppressive power structures of the world in which we've been formed, the personal wounding we each carry with us, our childlike dependency upon God.

But not in order to stay trapped there in that awful void – but to trigger a cry of wonder that in all of our wounding and our fracture we are utterly loved. We may all be sinners (to use the traditional

religious terminology) but we are loved sinners. God does not leave us alone in the dark. And it's the awareness of and gratitude for the blinding light of God's grace that fuels our sense of devotion and vocation, however that manifests in our own life.

And the fact that Jesus engages a child to become such a powerful metaphor for adult discipleship is an expression of the high regard that Jesus shows for children, which is unusual for his time. There are lots of children in the gospel, from direct encounter-stories like the raising of Jairus's daughter, or the healing of the boy experiencing convulsions, to stories like the Syro-Phoenician Woman whose daughter is off-stage but playing an important role in the narrative.

In the next chapter of Mark, we see Jesus berating the disciples for trying to stop children from meeting him, and in Matthew's version of that story Jesus launches into a fierce condemnation of anyone who doesn't value the lives of children. And when Jesus wants a metaphor to explain God's relationship to us, he tells us to address God as our affectionate parent, with all humankind bonded together as God's children.

Now we can hardly claim that the Christian Church itself has always been mindful of this teaching, bearing in mind the horrific extent of church child abuse cases that have emerged since the 1980s, and the shameful degree to which the church has seemed much more inclined to protect its own public reputation than the safety of children. As with the church's treatment of women, and of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

people, of people with disabilities, of LGBTQ+ people, there is much work of healing and reparation still to be done.

At St James's, as our small local contribution to this area of work, we hope to shortly introduce our new Children's Champion to replace Elena now she has gone off to train for ordination. And in the meantime, let us pray together for the children in our community and world wide:

Eternal God, Creator and Giver of Life, you have blessed us with the joy and care of children.

We pray for every baby that is born today, whether it is born into poverty or wealth, illness or health, knowing that each and every child is infinitely precious to you.

We pray for children living amidst deprivation, war, neglect, cruelty and exploitation – that they may grow in freedom, in dignity, in agency and in power.

We pray for teachers, for paediatricians, for child therapists and lawyers, and for all those working to support children and enable their voices to be heard and valued.

And we pray for parents, and especially those whose children have been taken early into your care, that they may be comforted by knowing them to be free from pain and surrounded by your love. Fill each of one us with sensitive respect for all the children we encounter in our lives. Give us the grace to listen with patience to their worries and problems. Make us compassionate for their temptations and their failures. And help each us to play our part in a child's thrilling discovery of the person you are calling them to be, and may all

*children's lives be interwoven with
threads of love, of joy, of creativity and
of justice.*

Amen