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Bible reading: Matthew 18:1-5

The greatest in the kingdom of heaven

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'

He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.'

Reflection

I wrote my last reflection for this email back in June. We were still in national lockdown but we'd been promised that restrictions would begin to lift. After three months of staying at home, protecting the NHS and saving lives, I – along with huge swathes of the UK population – was looking forward to being able to see friends and family for the first time in many weeks.

During July and August, in line with increasingly relaxed government guidance, families took the opportunity to snatch well-earned holidays, schools reopened, young people prepared for university and returned to jobs in the hospitality and leisure sector, adults have been strongly encouraged to return to offices and other workplaces, and across the UK we've been encouraged to 'Eat out to help out'.

But even as we enjoyed these newly regained freedoms there were signs that all was not well. In Leicester, where I live, the national lockdown had barely been lifted when we were confined to a local lockdown under which we were almost as constrained as we had been previously. At the same time, we were regularly reminded that COVID-19 was disproportionately affecting those in deprived communities.

And today, as I write (a phrase I hate, mainly because it's usually completely redundant), we await a press conference from the Prime Minister which is likely to tell us that restrictions on our movements and activity are about to be increased as COVID-19 infection rates rise, currently doubling roughly every seven or eight days.

Every time I turn my radio or TV on, or check the news apps on my phone, I'm bombarded by voices jostling for the opportunity to tell me why we find ourselves in this position and whose fault it is.

Against this backdrop, today's Gospel reading from Matthew is quite a challenge. In the context of a pandemic in which children are 'are much less likely [than adults] to become seriously ill and die' (Channel 4 FactCheck, 28 Aug 2020), what does it mean to 'become like little children' (18:3)?

Actually, perhaps this is the wrong question. Perhaps a better question is, why, in the context of this exchange, did Jesus draw attention to children?

We know from accounts across the four gospels that the disciples had a bit of a thing about power; in fact, it's not unreasonable to assume that the disciples' desire for power and recognition lies behind the question that starts the conversation: 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'

Of all the possible responses they could have predicted, I think it unlikely that the disciples expected Jesus to beckon over someone so far down the social and religious pecking order.

I suspect that we've become so familiar with this encounter, and the stories recorded immediately after it in Matthew's gospel – tales of millstones and lost sheep – that we miss the countercultural nature of this exchange. But it is, of course, entirely consistent with Jesus' message – the message of the whole Bible – both that the kingdom of heaven is good news for those that societies throughout history have put at the bottom of the pile, and that those at the top of the pile will find this fact a very bitter pill to swallow.

As we enter what appears to be a new phase in the unfolding of the story of COVID-19, I'd like to ask a question: whose voices are we listening to? In the midst of this pandemic, the loudest voices are the voices of those in power and it's right that we should listen to them. But they are not the only voices and they only ever tell us part of the story.

Prayer

God of miracles and mundanity, God of divine mystery and surprising presence,
sow the seeds of your compassionate love in our lives.

God of the well-heeled and the un-homed, God of the amply fed and the empty-bellied,
grow the seeds of your compassionate love in our communities.

God of the vociferous and the voiceless, God of the loved and the loveless,
may the fruitfulness of your compassionate love be known through our witness and worship,
by our commitment to justice and our helpful living,
by our inclusive hospitality and our generous presence,
that your Church may be the good news of Jesus Christ to all.

Amen.

(Helen Kirk, Chester and Stoke-on-Trent District Chair, taken from the Methodist Church Prayer Handbook 2019/20)

Response

Set aside some time to think about which voices you have been listening to as the COVID-19 pandemic has unfolded.

- Which newspapers, television news stations and news websites do you get your news from? How might you broaden your perspective?
- Who are you having conversations with? How might you hear stories from those whose lives and experiences of the pandemic are very different to your own?
- Who are you praying for and what is the focus of your prayers? Who could you start praying for and how might that reshape your understanding of their experience?

As you think and pray, consider how you might practically respond to what you are learning about yourself and about the pandemic. How could you use your voice for the benefit of those who struggle to make their voices heard?

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