

## **SJW Trinity 14 2024 – James 1.17–27 - baptism**

*May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

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

“Who do you think you are?” - sorry that wasn’t supposed to sound as accusatory as it did. “Who do you think you are?” is a very popular BBC series where celebrities get to trace their ancestry as far back as they can – or at least as far back as they have to, to uncover something interesting and notable about their forebears. My wife Sue has long been interested in our family trees, and building on the work my mum started, has got back to the late 1700s for the Hengist/Barley/Barelegs line. I should really be the Revd Barry Barelegs or Barry Barley but I’m grateful to my great grandfather, Charles Barley who, for some reason known only to himself took the alias Ambrosius Wertheim Hengist!

But one of the things that's a constant surprise in family research is the number of children each had in the past. It shouldn't really come as a surprise as the reasons are quite obvious when you think about it.

For starters, let's consider society's view of marriage which was heavily influenced by the teaching of the church. Here is an excerpt from the introduction to the Form of Solemnization of Matrimony as found in the Book of Common Prayer 1662 which, by the way, is still the Church of England's primary authorised text and is available to couples even today although I've never been asked to use it – perhaps you'll hear why.

*[Holy Matrimony] ...is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God; duly considering the causes for which Matrimony was ordained.*

*First, It was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.*

*Secondly, It was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.*

*Thirdly, It was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other...*

The first reason for marriage was to have children.

The second was to cater for those people who couldn't control their sexual urges.

Mutual support came a poor third.

In addition to the church's stated aims for marriage there was very little reliable birth control available to them – and in any case, that which was available, was frowned upon (and in some denominations still is – at least officially) by the church.

Also, women had little say in the matter of sex – men had conjugal rights and women, conjugal duties. Rape within marriage was not legally recognised.

But perhaps even more important was the rate of infant mortality. In the UK in 1800 the mortality rate for under 5's was a staggering 33%. By the end of the Victorian era in 1901, thanks to the concerted efforts of government and philanthropists it had been reduced to 23%. At the launch of the NHS in 1948 it was already down to 6% and today stands at 0.4%.

The infant mortality rate in the Roman Empire<sup>1</sup> is estimated to have been similar to that in the UK in 1800. Childhood in the time of Jesus as in Victorian England was something to be survived. It was something that put a drain on the family finances until they could earn an income. Children couldn't own property.

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<sup>1</sup> Todman, Donald. (2007). Childbirth in Ancient Rome: From traditional folklore to obstetrics. *The Australian & New Zealand journal of obstetrics & gynaecology*. 47. 82-5. 10.1111/j.1479-828X.2007.00691.x. accessed 19/9/2024 11.32

If you think the lot of women was bad, then children had it worse. They had no rights – they were virtually non-entities.<sup>2</sup>

So what has this got to do with anything? Well, we have a very different understanding of childhood from those who would have heard Jesus in Galilee that day. In this morning's gospel, Jesus has just confided in his closest followers that he thinks he will be killed. And what do the disciples do in response. They bicker amongst themselves about their places in the pecking order. When Jesus takes up the little child and places it in the midst of the disciples he is doing so to shame their argument as to who was the greatest among them. Much to Jesus' frustration, the disciples are still applying the world's criteria, not the kingdom's. In the context of this morning's gospel, the child is not a symbol of innocence and purity to be emulated. The child is better seen as a symbol of a "non-person" to be elevated and cherished.

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<sup>2</sup> The Common Worship Lectionary - A Scripture Commentary – Year B Ed. Houlden and Rogerson (SPCK, London) 2002

To be clear. Jesus is not saying that our faith must be child-like, or naïve or unquestioning. When Jesus places the child in the midst of the disciples he is contrasting the worldly values displayed by their discussions about rank and position and power with the values of the Kingdom he is announcing. In the Kingdom of God the most important are those the world ignores. In Matthew's gospel Jesus says as much at the conclusion of the parable of the labourers in the vineyard "the last will be first, and the first will be last"<sup>3</sup> Both Matthew and Luke report Jesus as saying that 'all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.'<sup>4</sup> The values of the Kingdom turn those of the world on its head. They are the very opposite of the world's in the time of Jesus, and arguably in our own times too.

When I read about some of the power games being played out at the General Synod with its parties and

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<sup>3</sup> Matt 20.16

<sup>4</sup> Matt 23.12; Luke 14.11

factions, I can't help but wonder if the church needs reminding of its core calling – to seek out the powerless, the voiceless, the forgotten, the ignored, the despised, the outcast – those dehumanised and demonised – the “non-persons” of our day.

And who are they? Who are today's ‘non-persons’? You only have to look at the populist message of right-wing politicians in this country, in mainland Europe and around the world. People are often referred to as ‘animals’, ‘scum’, ‘vermin’, ‘feral’, ‘monsters’; We hear about being ‘swamped’ or ‘infested’ or invaded. These are the ways we dehumanise people – denying them the respect they deserve as God's children. Christians are called to avoid using such language. But not only that, we are called to challenge the use of dehumanising language whenever we can.

I am reliably informed that on one occasion a high-ranking member of the clergy of a place that should

know better described someone as ‘trailer-trash’. A more junior member of the clergy had the guts to add the words “for whom Christ died.”

Whenever people are dehumanised, imagine Jesus taking them into the centre of the discussion, and standing alongside them. *“Whoever welcomes one such as [this dehumanised person] in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me, but the one who sent me.”*

But there is another aspect of the example of a child which Jesus may have been highlighting. It is a hallmark of childhood that it is lived entirely at the grace and mercy of others. Children depend on others and in the early years they are utterly vulnerable. Is this perhaps the contrast Jesus is making? That the disciples – those who will go on to lead others in the Way of Jesus – should understand their own existence as a consequence of the grace



and mercy of God - that they, like him, must become vulnerable.

Jesus lived his whole life from cradle to cross in a state of vulnerability because that's what a life suffused exclusively with love looks like. Loving requires us to become vulnerable.

An inclusive church like ours should never seek to be powerful or to measure its success in any way other than the way it fulfils its calling to love those whom the world treats as the least important – often the most vulnerable.

*“Whoever welcomes one such as [this vulnerable person] in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me, but the one who sent me.”*

Let us pray

God, who draws near,  
who comes to our level,  
whose nature is revealed  
in lordship laid aside:  
give us grace to welcome you  
in the one who tests the bounds  
of our community:  
in the child,  
the outcast,  
the one who comes with no power  
save that of remaking our heart;  
through Jesus Christ, the one who will be betrayed.  
Amen.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Prayers for an Inclusive Church – Stephen Shakespeare Canterbury Press, Norwich 2008 p71