
Things Hidden from the Wise

Matthew 11:25-6

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 3, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

During the 1630s, the French colony of Quebec was evangelized by Jesuit priests and Ursuline nuns. They spent a great deal of time with First Nations people, especially the Huron tribe. The Catholic missionaries were bemused to find a people who didn't speak French, and assumed that because the Huron couldn't speak French, they obviously weren't capable of rational thought, and should therefore be treated like children. By contrast the Huron wanted to show hospitality to the French missionaries, and the biggest compliment they knew how to give the priests and nuns was to invite them to instruct, feed and dress their children.

The missionaries responded to the compliment by imposing frequent corporal punishment on Huron children. This seemed to the Huron to be a form of brutality that defied comprehension. But the missionaries were undaunted. The priests and nuns were careful to discourage the Huron from loving their children too much, lest they fail to love God above all. Once again the Huron were dumbfounded. They couldn't comprehend any contradiction between loving God and loving children. The French grew weary of these misunderstandings so they shipped the Huron children off to boarding schools where they could offer their superior customs behind closed doors. [Jerome Berryman, *Children and the Theologians*, 129-30]

The Jesuit view of the character and upbringing of children is seriously out of fashion today. Our hearts are all with the Huron. Corporal punishment is cruel and counterproductive, and children are beautiful and made to be loved and enjoyed, not crushed and bridled. How foolish the French were, we think, and how arrogant of them to assume they knew better than the Huron.

And in this spirit we turn to Jesus' words in Matthew chapter 11, where we read, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will." It seems clear that the Huron in general, and their children in particular, exactly fit the profile for the "infants" Jesus is talking about. The playful instinct in each of us rather enjoys the imperious missionaries being made to look ridiculous by the disarming ingenuousness of the First Nations peoples.

But the truth about children isn't quite as simple as that. Let me tell you a very painful story. One Friday afternoon in February 1993, 2-year-old James Bulger was taken by his mother for a shopping trip in a suburb north of Liverpool. He disappeared, and 48 hours later his disfigured body was found on a railway line two and a half miles away. The British newspapers immediately exploded in a volcanic lava of horror about who could possibly perpetrate such a wicked and hideous crime. Eight days later two suspects, Robert Thompson and John Venables, were arrested and charged with his murder. What the newspapers and the public could not understand, and, nearly 20 years later, still cannot fully come to terms with, is that these two suspects didn't fit the profile of the demonic child-killer. Both of them were 10 years old. They were, themselves, children.

The case presented two extremes. On one side was the poor little 2-year-old boy, an infant just on the brink of becoming a child, representing a nation's projections about childhood as innocent and vulnerable and fleeting and fragile. On the other side were these two terrifying and ruthless 10-year-old murderers, children on the brink of crossing the threshold into puberty, embodying a nation's most ghoulish fears about psychopathic bullies and perverted predators and primal violence. James mother's experience was every parent's worst nightmare: turning her back in a shop for one moment only to find her child abducted – later to discover he had been horribly tortured before being brutally murdered. But that was not the only nightmare. Imagine discovering that one's own child had been the perpetrator of such a crime. If James' mother spends her days wondering what she could possibly have done to deserve such grief, surely John and Robert's mothers must

spend each day wondering what in their nature or nurture produced two sons who could become such brutal killers.

The public reaction to the case was of a horrified and sobered nation. Most famously, Prime Minister John Major declared the whole attitude to children had become too indulgent. "Society," he said, "needs to condemn a little more, and understand a little less." That's a long way from the Huron, who couldn't imagine that you could love a child too much. If you look at the imprisonment rates in British prisons, they soar upwards in the years immediately following 1993. The nation experienced a colossal loss of confidence in the goodness of human nature. Criminals were no longer regarded as antisocial or inadequate. They were seen as evil.

The national revulsion against the two 10-year-old boys who killed James Bulger contains a genuine paradox. It was based on the profound need to affirm and preserve the unique innocence and beauty of children. Belief in God was becoming problematic. By contrast, belief in children had become an absolute article of faith. A child who could stoop to murder another child was not permitted to tarnish the image of children in general. Instead, one of two strategies was adopted to avoid tarnishing the innocence of children. Either the two child-killers must be treated as quasi-adults, having done such a ghastly thing. (This was the criminal justice approach, which put them through an adult trial.) Or, they must be vilified and regarded as egregiously and uniquely evil. (This was the lens adopted by the popular media.) What could not possibly be allowed to happen was any revision of the almost universal insistence that children are innocent, wondrous and pure – a kind of foretaste of heaven dwelling within a complex and sometimes sordid world. It's as if we've stopped believing there was a historical fall at the moment Adam and Eve ate the apple, but instead there's a developmental fall that happens to every human being around about the onset of puberty. To suggest that children aren't innocent is a heresy against that widely asserted creed.

But that creed, however widely asserted, is nonetheless false. The truth is, children aren't innocent. The innocence of children is not a biological fact or theological dogma. It's an ideal manufactured by the social and economic circumstances of recent centuries. In the Middle Ages there were of course people aged between infancy and adulthood. But there weren't children. If you look at paintings from the period, there are babes-in-arms, and young adults – but there aren't children. By the time you're 7, you're more or less an adult. Childhood emerged in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries at the point where a critical mass of people had sufficient economic security to withdraw their offspring from the workplace for a lengthy period in order to give them a formal education. Gradually there grew an aura around a class of humans who were to be kept pure by being protected from sex and death, and earmarked by being separated from adults in clothing. Once the sociological shift was made, a whole host of psychological and biological realities crowded around to underwrite it.

It's certainly true to say children often see things adults don't see, and are sometimes unencumbered by inhibitions and cynicism in a way that inspires and frees many adults who feel their own lives are heavily circumscribed and full of suspicion. But the opposite is often the case too. I recall doing a presentation on the Exodus to a group of 8-year-olds. I got out the land of Egypt and the wilderness and the Red Sea and the Egyptians on their chariots; whereupon one of the children said, in a matter-of-fact way, "Oh, I've seen this on TV, so I know it's not true." Just reflect upon the imagination that produced such a remark. An imagination that had learned to distrust everything it has ever seen on TV. How sad. We might say, "Oh, but really that child is just protecting himself from being hurt." And the answer is, yes – and isn't that why adults do the same thing? Aren't cynics all failed romantics? Deep down, aren't skeptics all hurt children? I'm not sure the great divide between children and adults holds up as much as we'd like it to.

And that brings us back to Jesus' words, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." Why would God reveal the truths of the universe to children? You wouldn't put children in charge of a bank, or a university, or

a brewery, or a city – you’d entrust such institutions to the wise and intelligent. So why, when it comes to the secrets of the universe, does God bestow them on children?

There’s a number of possible answers to that question. I’ve already dismissed the answer that children are innocent, unlike adults who’re guilty. But there’s still the line that children are the epitome of potential. One of the fascinating things about children is that they’re a largely unopened book, a story in its early chapters, and anything could happen. Again, this is still true of most adults, but we choose to ignore that fact and project all our sense of potential onto children. A more promising answer is that children are vulnerable. They are almost always less physically powerful, less sophisticated and shrewd, and less well-connected than adults. That doesn’t make them innocent, but it does make them disproportionately subject to the ill intentions of others. Children make up around half of those who live in poverty in this country, amounting to one in four children in the nation as a whole. [U.S. Census Bureau September 1996] The Bible constantly shows us how God identifies with and upholds the vulnerable, from slaves in Egypt to exiles in Babylon to widows in Samaria to blind men on the road to Jerusalem to dying girls in Galilee. Jesus becomes a vulnerable baby himself and dies as a political casualty of a gerrymandered trial in a ghastly posture where he can’t even wipe his own bleeding face. Yes, children are vulnerable, and that may be why God reveals the secrets of the universe to them.

But I think there’s one characteristic of children that’s less sentimental than their being innocent, less of a projection than their being full of undeveloped potential, and more mundane than their being vulnerable. And I believe that this rather everyday characteristic is the explanation for why Jesus thanks the Father for choosing to reveal the secrets of the universe to children, and for what that statement means for us today. Children are largely ignored. I don’t mean that parents don’t spend time with their children or the state budget doesn’t put enough into education or churches and voluntary groups don’t offer enough programming for children. I mean it doesn’t occur to anyone that children can understand the secrets of the universe. Sure, children say quaint things and ask interesting questions. But does it really occur to the teacher, pastor, parent, pediatrician, nursery supervisor, or out-of-school club organizer that a child might actually know something they, the adult, don’t already know?

“Listen to children.” It’s a slogan. It’s a cliché that comes into play in ghastly circumstances when adults need to be reminded that children can be vulnerable to abuse and that they seldom make up stories of genuine mistreatment. Listen to children. It’s an easy phrase to repeat, and it keys into a popular psychological theme that all of us, especially the socially uneasy, need a good listening to. One of my favorite children’s books is called “Not Now, Bernard.” The infant Bernard tries in vain to tell his parents that there’s a huge monster in the back yard, all ready to gobble him up. Young Bernard’s parents simply respond, “Not now, Bernard,” so the bewildered Bernard goes back in the yard and, sure enough, the monster promptly gobbles him up. Then the monster enters the house and starts nibbling at Bernard’s parents. But the parents give the monster the same treatment they’d given their son: “Not now, Bernard.” The book ends with the monster in Bernard’s bed, complaining that he doesn’t want milk and a cookie at bedtime. “But I’m a monster,” he says. “Not now, Bernard,” says Bernard’s mother. The moral of the story is clear: listen to children, or they will turn into monsters.

It’s a good moral. But the gospel goes further than that. Jesus’ words go beyond the child psychiatrist or the family therapist or the provocative children’s story writer. Jesus isn’t saying, “Listen to children, because it’s good for children to tell you what they’re thinking and feeling, and it makes them feel loved and important.” Jesus is saying, “*Listen to children, because they know something you don’t know, something you need to know, something that lies at the heart of the universe, something that lies at the heart of God.*” “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,” says Jesus, “because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent *and have revealed them to infants.*” Jesus is saying God is made known to children, in a way God is not made known to adults, even the wise and intelligent. That’s not because children are special; it’s not because they’re innocent; it’s not because of some innate insight children have – it’s *because God has chosen*

to order creation this way. And so, if you want to know God, you're going to want to stay close to children. And listen to what they say. Not for *their* sake, but for *yours*.

Why has God chosen to order creation this way? Because in Jesus' sight, nothing is wasted, inferior, unimportant, of no account. Nothing is ignored. God doesn't just speak through children. God likes to speak through whatever and whoever is widely ignored. God has a heart for Bernard, not because he's a child, but because he's ignored. Ignoring an aspect of God's creation is an insult to God the creator. Cherishing and listening to neglected parts of God's creation, especially in human form, is a vital dimension of the way we worship and come to know God.

Whom do you ignore? What do you ignore? What in your regular surroundings do you consistently overlook? Who in your circle or community do you regard as of no account? To whom do you consistently find yourself saying, "Not now, Bernard"? What in yourself do you profoundly neglect? Listen up. You may have just discovered where God is revealing the secret of all things.