

CHILDREN ARE UNBEATABLE

We've just had our first grandchildren and I'm mesmerised by them. I can watch them for hours. They're fantastic. I could no more hit them than support Chelsea (I speak as a Newcastle United supporter so I'm tempted to follow anyone at the moment). I know I'm at the sentimental stage with my grandchildren – 2 of them under a year old – but if that's what it takes to keep them safe, I'll be sentimental.

The key word, though, I think, is *respect*. Respect means different things to different groups of people.

It means one thing to young people in a gang who demand respect from others.

It means something else to a government trying to put a respect agenda high up in our thinking.

It means something else again to a venerable British institution like the monarchy, or on a good day with a following wind, the Church of England.

But to us here it also means the way that Jesus related to children. He showed them respect, a remarkable amount of respect for a society where children were more valued for their future potential, than their present reality.

In Mark 9 he takes a child and put it among his argumentative disciples and says 'Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name, welcomes me – and whoever welcomes me welcomes not just me but the one who sent me.' He's saying – a child deserves respect, because a child carries with him or herself the image and likeness of God. He's not playing with small change here – he's really upping the stakes.

It's the same in the next chapter. People were bringing children to Jesus, (like we still do – we do it in baptism.) But the disciples told them to back off – Jesus was too busy or too important or just 'too', to be bothered with these little people. But Jesus says, 'No, on the contrary, let them come to me as much and as close as they like. Don't you realise that whoever fails to receive God's kingdom like a child does, will never enter it. You've got to be child-like to recognise the presence of the kingdom, and to say yes to it.' Again, Jesus raises the stakes. Children matter, supremely.

Note he didn't put the child amongst the grown-ups and say, 'Now little one, you can learn from these grown ups how to be a Christian.' He said to the grown ups, 'Unless you become like this little one, you'll never know what it is to be a Christian.' How's that for thinking outside the box? How's that for respect?

So Jesus is saying 1. children have an infinite, inherent and unconditional value, in their own right.

2. children give us a model for how to enter the kingdom of God – with openness, trust and gentleness.

Over the road just now I quoted the American bumper sticker that relates to Guantanamo etc and says simply 'Who would Jesus torture?' And I suggested you could turn that just a little and get 'What child would Jesus hit?' Let's get real. Jesus demonstrated in his life and on the cross that it's non-violence that changes the world. The tough love of Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu. And violence is never the answer with children.

But gaining that respect for children, so that they aren't the subject of adult violence, is going to take a lot of public education.

At the Lambeth Conference this summer we were talking to Archbishop David from New Zealand who had been in the thick of the

legislative battle on this one – and he still had the scars. It seems to touch some deep, distorted convictions about ownership of children, or about power relationships between parents and children. It also touches some painful memories of failed parenting, I think.

If you've read the book 'We need to talk about Kevin' you may have been inclined to think a little homespun discipline might have been very helpful early on.

But that's not the answer and never has been. Jesus got it right in one bound.

Children have an infinite, inherent, and unconditional value, in their own right.

Children give us a beautiful model for how to enter the kingdom of God.

Quite simply, children are unbeatable. So let's not do it. There is an alternative. It's called respect. See Jesus for details. And see Parliament for legislation – we trust.