

A WALK WITH JESUS FROM CAPERNAUM TO JERUSALEM

Based on St. Matthew's Gospel Chapters 9-21

As a follower of Jesus, I invite you to join me on a walk with my Lord and His disciples with Matthew's Gospel as our guide. We will stop with Jesus at several points on the way. The reason we pause at these places is because in each case children (or young people) are part of the story as told by Matthew. We could have chosen other subjects (for example, women, the poor, the sick, the rich, the rulers, the religious people etc.), so this is only a thread of the narrative, but in the light of what Jesus does and says, we will discover that it is a significant strand. This makes it all the more surprising that it has often gone unnoticed and unremarked in seminaries and churches.

The journey on we are embarking with Jesus takes us from the north of the area in which he ministered, to the south; and from Capernaum the centre of his ministry in Galilee, to Jerusalem the centre of Jewish faith and tradition.

On the way Jesus reveals by actions and examples, as well as stories and teaching, that he is heading for the place where the divine cup awaits him (Matthew 20: 22). And it is significant that his ministry has a new urgency and focus. He continues to announce and reveal the Kingdom of Heaven, but once Peter has declared that he is "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16: 13-16), Jesus shares openly and repeatedly with his followers the very heart and mystery of the Gospel: that he, the Messiah, must suffer and be killed before being raised to life. In this way it will become clear that the Kingdom of Heaven is completely and utterly different to the kingdoms on earth, human institutions and organisations, and anything the disciples might have come to expect.

Let's begin our walk with Jesus. For some of us perhaps the idea of a pilgrimage will resonate, possibly even for others a forerunner to the Stations of the Cross. And we will pause ten times in the journey to ponder ten insights into the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven taught by Jesus that are axiomatic in the whole of our lives and ministry including our relationships with children, young people and families

Responding to a father's cry for his daughter

Capernaum is a town on the West side of the Sea of Galilee. It was the base of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, so it is fitting that we begin our walk with Jesus there. As we join him, he has been having dinner with Matthew, a tax collector and a lot of his friends and colleagues. This provokes a reaction from the Pharisees and while Jesus replies, he is interrupted by a leading member of the town's synagogue. The man is on his knees before Jesus, pleading on behalf of his daughter in front of everyone. Jesus responds immediately.

And this is typical of Jesus. Already in the Gospel there is a pattern emerging: people bring to Jesus those who cannot come themselves because of their condition (Matthew 4: 24; 8: 5; 8: 16). All types of people and conditions are represented, but in this case, it is a twelve-year-old girl. She is too ill to come, or even be brought, to Jesus, so her father intercedes for her on his knees. In this instance Jesus does not speak of the faith of her father, but he has been astonished at the faith of a centurion in the same town, and this synagogue ruler has remarkable faith: he believes Jesus can return the dead to life.

On his way Jesus meets an interruption and opposition. But he perseveres. The key is the intercession and faith of the father. We stop to consider our own role in relation to children. How often have we interceded on their behalf? And how costly is that intercession?

Meditation I wonder what was most special about that story for us. I wonder what we found most difficult. Can we name a child for whom we have interceded by name, and pleading on our knees? How deep is our faith in Jesus to help and to heal?

Children and the Kingdom of God

Jesus has been on the move since we last paused with him and he has been showing the Kingdom of God in parables and practical ways. John the Baptist his cousin is now in prison, and he sends some of his disciples to Jesus because he has begun to have serious doubts about whether Jesus is indeed the One of whom he spoke. Jesus tells these followers of John to report to him everything they have seen and heard (blind seeing, lame working, deaf hearing, and good news being preached to the poor).

But then he speaks to the crowds is about the Kingdom of Heaven using John as an example. John is the greatest of those born before the Kingdom of God has been revealed. But the least in the Kingdom is greater than John. It is important to note that it is Jesus who introduces the idea of greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven, and there is something subversive and puzzling about what he is saying. To illustrate his point, He refers to children playing in the streets: a game involving singing and possibly acting. Like many games, stories and rhymes that children adopt and adapt this game is one that can't be won: whether they laugh or cry there is no reaction.

We note that the children playing such games are completely unconscious of the meaning that Jesus gives to their actions, and this will be important in the journey ahead. There is no hint that children are in some way spiritual or devout, but rather that they can be unwitting signs of the Kingdom of God simply by being children and playing.

But there is one more clue or part of the thread in this very incident and Matthew records it in a dramatic and unique way. The things of the Kingdom have been hidden from the wise and learned... and revealed to little children. Important to pay attention to the Greek words for children in the NT. One translation here reads “ordinary people”. This is one of the fundamental tasks of Child Theology.) The fact that this revelation to little children is the will of the Father gives Jesus enormous satisfaction. The words, “Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure”, have no equivalent in the Gospels. (But we will find another “Yes” at the end of our journey with Jesus.)

Jesus teaches about the Kingdom of God, and to do this he spends much time expounding and reinterpreting the Law and the Prophets. But the Kingdom cannot be grasped by human endeavour and study: it is something that is revealed by God. And this revelation bears no correlation to people’s age, status, knowledge, cognitive or emotional intelligence.

Meditation I wonder how we have understood this passage and teaching until now. What must we unlearn in order to be open to the Father’s revelation? Can we cope with the ambivalence of children’s games, stories and rhymes? Can we allow children to be children, rather than shaping them in our own image? Do we share with John the Baptist doubts and questions about Jesus?

3. Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 17: 20)

A Mustard Seed

The Disciples fail a father and son

Caesarea Philippi was on the slopes of Mount Hermon, north of the Sea of Galilee, and not far from the present-day Damascus.



By now as we journey with Jesus there are familiar elements of the story. There are crowds coming to Jesus, attracted by his miracles and radical teaching, his charismatic character, and among the crowds are those, like the ruler of the synagogue in Capernaum, who are pleading for their children.

It was probably on Mount Hermon that Peter, James and John saw the transfigured Jesus with Moses and Elijah, and it was in the shadow of this snow-capped peak that a troubled father brought his epileptic son to Jesus. Traditionally the Transfiguration is distinct and set apart in the telling of the story of Jesus, and in liturgy, from the incident of the healing of this boy. Worth noting that Raphael's depiction of the story, above, presents them as having equal significance.

Unless we travel with Jesus step by step we can overlook the connections between the episodes in the story. He was coming down from the "mount of Transfiguration" when the father of the boy pleaded with him. Jesus healed the boy.

The disciples, who had been unable to help, wanted to know why they couldn't rebuke and drive out the demon. And Jesus spoke of their lack of faith (Matthew) and the need for prayer and fasting (Mark 9: 29). The two responses form an integrated truth: faith and prayer are inseparable. And they are the bedrock of our mission with children and in every setting.

It has been the hallmark of all those bringing people to Jesus as we have begun to see: the ruler of the synagogue in Capernaum had faith, and he prayed on his knees for healing.

And not only is this what the disciples are witnessing as people come to Jesus, and hearing as Jesus teaches them, but prayer and faith are integral to, and incarnate in, his life and ministry. In John's gospel we have the privilege of eavesdropping as Jesus prays personally and intimately. Later we will join him wrestling in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is a prayer of faith. It is a pleading prayer: he fell with his face to the ground (Matthew 26: 39).

But this prayer life embodies faith. We must note carefully that at this point in the story, he has just told his followers that he must suffer and die...and that he will be raised to life on the third day. Have you stopped to reflect on the faith of Jesus? I'm not sure what the writer to the Hebrews had in mind when he summoned up his great catalogue of the people of faith by referring to the Jesus as "the author of our faith" (Hebrews 11: 2), but in using a word applied to Jesus as the author of life, and of salvation, perhaps we should pause to let the significance of this moment in his ministry sink in. (Note the chapter on Temptation in *Entry Point*.)

Notice before we move on, the faith of the father of the Epileptic boy. We, followers of Jesus, the body of Christ, have no monopoly of faith. If we think that children's or any ministry in the name of Jesus is possible without faith, this is the time to quit! Above the door of Mill Grove, my family home, and where Ruth and I care for and support children and young people, are the words "Have faith in God". They testify to 125 years of practical, down-to-earth faith in a place where prayer "has been valid", trusting God to meet every one of our needs.

Meditation Have we been able to pray “Thy will be done”, seeking the Father’s agenda (“Missio Dei”) in relation to the children who have been entrusted to us? What are the cost and implications of this in our experience? Does our prayer life stem from faith, and is our faith undergirded by prayer?

4. Capernaum (Matthew 18: 3)

Coins

The challenge to change

Jesus has headed south, back to his home territory, and we have now arrived back at Capernaum, the well-known town on the shores of Lake Galilee, where Matthew and Peter lived.

On this occasion the context of the incident was again tax. Matthew is responsible for the Roman’s tax, but now there is the matter of the Temple Tax (with its own distinctive coins). The disciples are confronted by the real world of politics in an occupied country. Jesus speaks of the kings of the earth. It is little wonder, given his previous teaching about the Kingdom of God and John the Baptist, that they are puzzled by how this Kingdom relates to the real world. Perhaps taking their cue from Jesus, they have focussed on the single issue of greatness in this Kingdom.

In response Jesus placed a little child among them and taught that unless they changed and became like little children, they would not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

We must be extra careful and diligent at this point if we are not to stray from the way that Jesus is showing us. (As you know by now, with Haddon Willmer, a dear friend and colleague, I have been pondering this very passage for over twelve years, so I know some of the pitfalls all too well!) The meaning of this teaching is commonly misunderstood. Do you find that people often make a list of the attributes of children (for example, they are trusting, questioning, reliant and dependent, or others) and then seek to apply them to adults? We must be very careful if we do this that we don’t read our adult and cultural preferences into children!

The focus is not on the child and children’s ministry here. The primary question concerns whether we, as followers of Jesus, are prepared to *change* or not. If we are not, then we are unlikely ever to “enter into” God’s way of doing things. So, let’s ask ourselves whether we see the need to change, and if so, whether we are allowing Jesus to change us.

That is hard enough. But next comes the issue of *becoming like* the children (plural in the text). The only clue Jesus gives us is that we should be humble. (This word comes from the Latin word, *humus*, which means earth or compost.) The child in the midst had no status in the society of his time. And, as far as the story goes, she had done nothing to merit a place in the Kingdom of Heaven. In our book we suggest that the way to become like little children is revealed by Jesus in the next part of his teaching here. We shall therefore come to it very soon.

Once again, we find that Jesus is not only teaching this truth and acting on it, but that he embodies it in his life. The remarkable early Christian hymn recorded in the letter to the

Philippian followers of Jesus gets to the very heart of the matter: “Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man he *humbled* himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2: 5-8)

Meditation As we imagine a little child in our midst, perhaps one whose name we know, how do the words of Jesus speak to our hearts? Could it mean that we should be ready to lay aside everything that we have invested in following Jesus, all our ministry, and be prepared to start again? If we are to take hold of (even embrace) the cross, we will have to let go of all else. All status, merit, progress is meaningless. We are as marginal as a little child: outside the whole religious trading game where virtue is rewarded. Only by grace are we saved. And where we discover grace, there are no coins, no taxes, no status related to income or expenditure.

5. On the Beach (Matthew 18: 5)

A Bucket and Spade

Welcoming a child; welcoming Jesus.

We are still in Capernaum with the fishing boats moving silently across waters of Galilee clearly visible as Jesus speaks this astonishing sentence: “Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.”

As hinted a little earlier this teaching is inextricably linked with what Jesus says about changing to enter the Kingdom of God. How do we change? How can we change? There are virtually endless suggestions available to would be followers of Jesus (involving spiritual disciplines; the laying on of hands; being filled with the Spirit; study; fasting and the like).

An insight that Haddon Willmer and I grasped in the process of writing *Entry Point* was that if we really welcome, accept, receive a child in the name of Jesus, the humbling is inevitable: it has already begun. Who has not found herself kneeling to play with a little child? Who has not stopped adult activity to engage in play and make-believe?

For me the process is perhaps best described by Professor Frances Young in her book *Arthur's Call*. As a theologian and mother, she charts the profoundly troubling and disturbing journey as she tried to accept her very disabled son in the name of Jesus. (Other writers who intimate such a process are Jean Vanier and Henri Nouwen. In fact, in Henri Nouwen's last book, *Adam* there is a deeply revealing description of the cost and challenge of this process. For it shows with an honesty and reality that our ministry is only Christ-like when it is two-way, when we open ourselves up to the possibility that we are being blessed.) Please don't think this welcoming is an easy or painless process!

A path or road that is rocky, uphill, painful, completely inglorious and marginal in human estimation is the way of the cross. There can be no escaping or evading this. But in this troubling journey there emerges the discovery that in welcoming this child (please notice that it is a single child) we have unknowingly embraced Jesus! We do not, we dare not, we

cannot receive a child as a spiritual exercise or to merit a spiritual reward: that is to miss the point completely. Such an approach is antithetical to the nature of love and grace which are at the heart of the Kingdom of God. But the gift of the Father to those who are on the path of genuine humility is the gift of His son, Jesus. And where Jesus is received, we find ourselves deep in the presence, the embrace of the Father.

If we pause at this point to consider how this process might have been taking place since the dawn of human history and across the world, we will see that mothers, older sisters, aunts and grandmothers are among those who have been closest to the essence of things. Perhaps we can include among them the mother of Jesus, who had her own unique insights as she pondered what was happening in, through and around her. And then others in the village that it takes to raise a child who have stepped in when a mother has been unable to receive her child for whatever reason.

Meditation We need to be very still at this point because we are at the centre of the journey on which Jesus is leading us. Here everything comes together. The Kingdom of God can only be experienced by those who are humble like little children. One way of becoming humble is to receive a child in the name of Jesus. But this can be the way of the cross. On this way we may find Jesus! Is this something that we have, now we come to think of it, experienced in some measure ourselves from direct personal experience? Have we glimpsed it in the lives of others? What prayer begins to form as we find ourselves here?

6. A rocky coastline

(Matthew 18: 6-9)

A rock

Child abuse is abhorrent to God

With barely a pause Jesus changes mood as dramatically, for example, as in the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. It could well be that these words of Jesus are His most angry and condemnatory. And as he speaks, he surely points at the water of Lake Galilee: that is where the ripples of the person drowned with a millstone around his neck would forever be lodged in the imaginations of the listeners to his dire warning. It's so hard to read and hear them that we often simply omit them.

Don't you shudder when you hear the numbers of priests in the Roman Catholic Church in America who have been involved in child abuse? (In 1962 there was a document written by Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani discovered by the British newspaper *The Observer* that insisted that clergy should be secretive and silent when confronted by sexual abuse within the RC Church. This silence was to include the alleged victim, under threat of excommunication.)

By now we know that no church or denomination has been immune from similar abuse and cover ups. There is no Archbishop of Canterbury today for this very reason.

What do you feel in your heart when you think of the children murdered in Guatemala between 1981 and 1983? Among the 100,000 Mayan peasants who were slaughtered were thousands of children. Some were smashed against rocks or thrown into rivers as their parents watched. "Adios, Nino" said one soldier as he hurled a child into the river to drown (Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop*, Metropolitan, New York, 2006, page 90).

Can you conceive of how Jesus feels, or “who can sound the depths of sorrow in the Father heart of God” (the title of the hymn by Graham Kendrick)?

But this is not restricted to specific acts of abuse. It includes everything that might cause children (“little ones”) to sin. Have you considered the world we have allowed to be created for twenty-first century children, and the pressures on them to sin? Think of child soldiers who steal, murder and rape in their hundreds of thousands. Think of the tens of millions of child prostitutes. Think of the children of the rich who grow up to envy the possessions and wealth of others and long to have it. Consider those who are “branded” around the world by trans-national corporations and marketing machines. Think of the labels “customer” and “consumer” which are increasingly taken to represent children and families. Think of corporate and institutional paedophilia. Think of the educational system which resembles all too closely the industrial landscape in which it was shaped in its most common forms. In all these cases and so many more, children are being led into sin.

David Hay and Rebecca Nye write that “The adult world into which our children are inducted is more often than not destructive to their spirituality.” (*The Spirit of the Child*, page 21.) How does God see the modern world developing around us, given His primary concern for children, little ones, the weak and the vulnerable? And where does that leave us.

“Why do you go to church? You know everything in the Bible, and you are good, so you don’t need to go!” I was once told by a young person living at Mill Grove. “I go to kneel down and ask God’s forgiveness for the sins that I know I have committed, but also for the systems, institutions that I am allowing to be created, and not challenging, that cause little ones to sin.” It’s a sobering thought. A church close to Jesus will always be challenging by life, example and at times advocacy, the prevailing norms wherever children are suffering or at risk.

Meditation Let us bring to God the welter of emotions and feelings that we are experiencing right now, and the memories that have been re-awakened and stirred. We bring them to the cross of Jesus Christ, and see him bearing the suffering, contamination and dirtiness. Can we name a child whom we can protect or shelter in the name of Jesus? Is there a place in the world where the suffering of children has been breaking our hearts recently?

Do not despise the least of these little ones

The water of Galilee is still lapping near the feet of Jesus, but now it is the hills and the sheep, particularly to the east, richer in colours and textures as the afternoon turns to dusk, where the listeners now focus their attention. Don't overlook the fact that the story of the one lost sheep in Matthew's Gospel is told while the little child placed by Jesus is still standing in the midst.

The parable is prefaced by a strong injunction by Jesus: "See that you do not look down on these little ones." And this is in turn followed by a rather mysterious saying. "For I tell you that their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven." This forms the basis for the final chapter in the book, *Entry Point*. What it means we can but glimpse at the farthest limits of our imagination. But Jesus sees something hidden from nearly every other human eye and heart. Over the world and throughout history millions of children have suffered unnoticed, their plight unseen, their cries unheard. They have been betrayed by human society. Because we are human, we do not know their names. But here is a wonderful, yet far from transparent truth: they are not only not unnoticed by God, but in some way, they are close to Him and His loving face.

The parable is a reminder that although statistics are powerful and can stir us with a sense of huge injustice and suffering (this is how the Holocaust is usually portrayed to indicate its enormity), in the final analysis it is vital to realise that we are called to be good shepherds who will join in the search for the one lost sheep. We are reminded that Jesus spoke of welcoming a single child in his name (not huge numbers).

The Kingdom of God is not concerned about numbers, but about individual children, each with a name, each one made in the image of God, and each received in the name of Jesus. We must be ready to restructure our lives, our life together, so that the individual child is loved unconditionally.

It is salutary to reflect on the fact that this is why we are all part of the Christian community: because God sees each one of us as of eternal value and sent Jesus as the Shepherd to search for us and bring us to our Heavenly home on His shoulders.

"I was lost, but Jesus found me; found the sheep that went astray; threw His loving arms about me, led me back into the way." (From the hymn, "*I will sing the wondrous story*".)

"None of the ransomed ever knew how deep were the waters crossed, or how dark was the night, that the Lord went through, ere He found his sheep that was lost." (From the hymn, "*There were ninety and nine*".)

Meditation Can we allow our minds to wander beyond the families and churches we represent, children we know or can imagine through our usual networks and sources of information, and to consider one who died unheard, and unseen? What an indictment of so-called human community and civilisation! Perhaps we can be humbled by the limits of what humans can and have been unable to do for children despite all the optimistic rhetoric.

Children brought to Jesus

Jesus now leaves Capernaum and Galilee and wends his way south along the River Jordan, but on the East side known as Transjordan or Perea. He would have passed the place where he was baptised, and it is not fanciful to consider that it was near such a spot that this next incident occurs. John the Baptist at first resisted the request of Jesus for baptism before allowing the authority of Jesus to take precedence.

This is one of the ten stopping points where we may think we can move on without much need to reflect. People are bringing little children to Jesus: we recognise the now familiar pattern in evidence again. “Let the little children come to me”. Surely we all agree on this point? It is indeed the favourite of the teachings of Jesus about children whether judged by books, sermons or stained-glass windows and icons. What controversy could there possibly be?

Well, wait for it: the disciples, have been with Jesus throughout the journey on which we have travelled with him. They have seen what he did and heard what he taught with specific reference to children. But now that they have a chance to welcome a child in His name, they “rebuke” those who bring children to Jesus. Only they know why they did so, but it is a scandal that Jesus intervenes to redress.

We might like to think that we would never be those who prevent people from bringing children to Jesus! But sadly, it is not difficult to find examples of churches and Christians who have, intentionally or not, done this down through the centuries.

We have tended to overestimate our own skills and importance and to underestimate the significance of the direct relationship between children and their Saviour. (This is true for example in a field I know a bit about: “Children’s Bibles”. Adults have decided what they want to prevent children from reading in the Bible, and often it is the great stories of loss, suffering and separation. Consequently, many children have not been able to relate the messiness of real life with God’s presence and saving acts.)

What if people bring children to Jesus in our schools rather than churches? What if they have some very strange ideas about baptism and the sacraments? What if they need, in our view, education and medical help? What if we are trying to raise money to renovate the church? Please don’t lightly assume that you and I and our ministries have been innocent in all this. But rejoice that when children do find their way to Jesus, He welcomes them and blesses them beyond our comprehension. And let us be thankful to Fröbel, Montessori, Cavalletti and Berryman, among others, for all that they have taught and modelled.

Meditation Who are those who are bringing children to Jesus? How are they doing it? What are the ways in which our traditions, priorities and churches may come between children and Jesus however much we wish that they weren’t? We recall that near this very spot John the Baptist needed convincing to baptise Jesus...What do we imagine Jesus saying to us and how?

Seeing children as signs of the Kingdom of Heaven

We are still alongside the River Jordan, and the final destination of Jesus, and the critical event in the unfolding revelation of His kingdom in Jerusalem, is near.

These words of Jesus remind us of the blessings he gave in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5: 3 and 10). Children are now included along with the poor in spirit, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. It has nothing to do with ownership or merit. It is that to understand the Kingdom of God requires insights into the poor in spirit, the persecuted and children.

This is where I personally came into the whole field of Child Theology: at Westminster Chapel in London. Let me briefly mention just two of the points that dawned on me during that initial period. First, if children are signs of the Kingdom of Heaven, then we must get rid of all notions of power, territory, possession and hierarchies to enter it. This kingdom is a whole new way of living. It's an upside-down, inside-out and back-to-front world. Put simply it works on almost exactly the opposite principles of the political kingdoms we know from personal experience and history worldwide. God's ways are not our ways. Where He has His way, the whole feel of the place, and the nature of our common life together, change.

Second, just as the child is both fully human, and yet still becoming an adult, so the Kingdom of Heaven is both "Now" and "Not Yet". You have daily reminders of God's way of doing things whenever you see children at work and play. Is there a better sign of the Kingdom? Is this what the "Resurrection Mind" is all about, as it refuses to become fixed and finalised, as it remains open to further journeying, revelation and change? This surely is a characteristic of mission-shaped church. It is such a complete contrast with what the disciples and the mother of James and John still had in mind somewhere between the Jordan and Jericho (Matthew 20: 20-28).

Meditation How far are we able to allow our understandings of, and longings for, the Kingdom of Heaven to be challenged and changed by this truth? And how far are we willing to acknowledge that the Kingdom is always glimpsed in signs, never in its fullness and reality whether in church or the world?

Interpreting Children's Cries

And now, at last Jesus enters the Temple itself. He has come to His Father's House. He has come home. He has come to His own. The vast roar of the crowds has ebbed, like the withdrawing tide. He has made space for the nobodies and little people by clearing away all

the equipment needed for traditional temple worship. The blind and the lame can make it to him unaided. And the only recorded sound is of a group of young people who are calling out, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” They are responding to the very signs of the Kingdom that Jesus relayed to John the Baptist near the beginning of our journey with Jesus. The authorities are as indignant as the disciples were when people brought children to Jesus! Doesn’t Jesus hear what these children are saying? In an echo of his profound “Yes” in Matthew 11: 26 Jesus confirms that He does indeed hear what they are shouting. And then he draws the attention of the authorities to Psalm 8 verse 2.

If we had time to meditate on Psalm 8, we would begin to see how the cries of newborn babies can be understood in a whole new light. Everything changes when we trust God’s way of doing things; His purposes and intentions. In the Temple the authorities saw the behaviour of the young people who were singing and shouting as wholly out of place. Jesus saw them in a completely different way: they were doing exactly what God had ordained.

As we listen carefully to everything children and young people say and try to reflect on it in the light of God’s heart, we will find surprising things happening! When children shout and cry in anger, we will see sometimes that this is as it should be; they have experienced abuse and injustice. When children see play as more important than formal education, perhaps that is how God sees it too. And when they don’t do exactly what we think they ought to in church, is our disapproval representative of God and how He feels? Letting children be children is not as easy as it might seem! In church and school, we seem intent very often in turning them into adults as quickly as possible!

Meditation Let us imagine children in our families and churches as placed by Jesus in our midst. What difference does that make to how we receive them in His name?

Closing Meditation

This is the point at which we must leave our walk with Jesus. It is not the end, either of his earthly journey, or of ours.

As we said at the outset, we have traced just one thread in the story. It is, of course, not the only one, and we must be careful to handle it sensitively in relation to the many other threads that make up the tapestry of his ministry. But it is a distinct thread, and when seen, it is special beyond measure. It is not us finding something for ourselves, but Jesus helping us to see it. If we are to inspire and equip other Christians to join us in ministering to children, then it makes such a difference if we root and ground our teaching in the life and teaching of Jesus. It is as Rowan Williams said “always worth taking Jesus seriously”!

This walk **historically speaking** was a journey of perhaps one or two hundred kilometres, a pilgrimage from Capernaum to Jerusalem. That journey was framed by the cry of a father for his dying daughter (at the outset) and then the cries of a group of rowdy young people (at the close). Jesus heard in these cries an echo of the cries of suckling babes. In God’s

view such raw sounds are one of the most beautiful, insightful and powerful expressions in creation.

This walk **inwardly speaking** is a journey to our true selves and to the Cross. Strange that all this has been so hidden from the wise and learned commentators, perhaps us among them, and now it has been revealed to us. Perhaps we feel bold enough to join in the prayer of Jesus: “I thank you, Father, that You have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes...Yes, Father, for such was thy will.” (Matthew 11; 25-26) And to hear the echo in response of Jesus to the cries of the young people in the Temple: “Yes!”

This walk **in our daily lives** is the call of Jesus to take up our cross and to follow him by living the way of the Kingdom of God. Only in taking appropriate action will the change that is required to enter the Kingdom take place. But we should not take this action in order to gain merit or develop spiritually, but only out of love of God and our neighbour.

It was an epic one for Jesus and for his disciples, and it is an epic journey for all those whose eyes and ears are open, the heart of the Kingdom and mission have been revealed, it is also momentous.

Of the ten stopping places, where is the place that you now need to pause and be with the Master, so that He can show you more of His will and purposes? He is in no hurry to move on. He will wait for you and with you until you are ready to move on. Let us share the silence together as we allow Jesus to speak to us by name in the privacy of each of our hearts and minds.

And let us close as we say together the Lord’s Prayer.

Keith J. White

(This is a revised version of a paper first given to the Episcopal Church’s Conference on Children’s Ministry and Mission at Camp Allen, Texas in 2004, at High Leigh in 2005, Marlborough School, in 2006, Semisud, Quito in March 2007, in Penang 2008, in Flämslätt, Skara in 2016, in Stockholm in 2017. During the process it has changed as I have been changed, and one of the key factors in that change has been my twelve-year conversation with Professor Haddon Willmer that resulted in the book, *Entry Point*. Another equally significant factor has been the privilege I have had in continuing to welcome children by name in the name of Jesus, including 7 grandchildren, and many more at Mill Grove, over the period I have been pondering Child Theology.)