

Jesus welcomes (Back to church Sunday)

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Date: 09 September 2012

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[0 : 00] Let me add my welcome to you. My name is Sam. I'm one of the pastoral team here at St. Paul's, and it is really good to see a bunch of faces that I don't know very well. Hopefully I'll get the chance to meet some of you over dinner at the after party after the service, but if I don't get the chance to chat to you, consider this a welcome, and hopefully I will get to at some point in the not-too-distant future.

I'm going to pray, and then we're actually going to have a look at that passage that Helen just read out for us. In particular, we're going to focus on just four verses right at the beginning of it. And try and see if we can understand what it is that God is saying to us.

That's what we believe the Bible is. It's God's way of talking to us and teaching us things. And so we're going to try and understand just those four verses tonight and try and think what does that mean for us individually. So how about I pray, and then we'll get stuck into it.

Father God, we thank you for bringing us here tonight. We thank you for a beautiful day. We thank you for warm weather. We thank you for the Bible, which is your word. And we ask that you would help us to understand it tonight so that we might see you more clearly and know what it means to follow you.

Amen. I wonder if you've ever felt like you weren't welcome, felt like you didn't belong somewhere. A couple of weeks ago, it's probably a little over a month ago now, the staff team that I'm a part of here at St. Paul's allocated a half a day to spend together to do something fun.

[1 : 20] Now, at my very enthusiastic recommendation, we landed on spending the day doing lawn bowls. Now, before you knock it, it's actually a really fun afternoon.

But it's fair to say that for a 29-year-old and for pretty much all of the staff, it's a cross-cultural experience. And when we arrived at the bowling club that we had chosen, we eventually figured out which door we were supposed to walk into.

We walked in, we were met by some carpet that wasn't that dissimilar to the lovely carpet that we're standing on now. We were met by an almost empty room. There was one table of slightly older men who were sitting there drinking, and they were, at best, disinterested, at worst, angry that we were in the room.

And we kind of looked around, trying to find a staff member who could help us, but there was no one. There was just a kind of crumpled up, stained sign-in book that was on a table in front of us that we were kind of supposed to use our powers of deduction to figure out how things worked. Eventually, we'd been in there for about 10 minutes, and a staff member appears. That staff member then proceeded to try and convince us that we didn't have a booking for that day. After producing the voucher and a receipt, she conceded.

[2 : 35] At which point, the kitchen staff came out to let us know that we didn't have a booking for that day and they weren't going to be ready to cook lunch for us. A bit more back and forth, and eventually they went away and tried to figure out what they were going to give us for food.

They stood around with us for a little while, and eventually they figured out that what needed to happen was to give us some lawn bowls and send us out onto the bowling green. But even once we got out there and we were left to our own devices, there was still this sense that the table of men inside, they put us on the green right in front of the window.

I'm not sure if it was a ploy or not, but there was this sense that those men were inside watching and laughing. They may not have been, but that was how it felt. Because we're sitting there fumbling about at a sport that most of us haven't done before, and we're just feeling completely out of place.

We didn't have the right clothes. We didn't know what the etiquette was. We weren't using the correct words for the correct things. And we just felt like outsiders, like we didn't belong. It's not a very fun feeling, but the reality is that for some of us, that might be how church feels.

It might be that this is the first time in a long time that you've been in a church. Maybe you've never been before because you just weren't sure that you would actually fit in with churchy people.

[3 : 51] You dress different, you swear, you smoke, you've got a tattoo, and you've never really been keen on singing in public. And so the idea of coming to a church, you just kind of went, they're just going to stare at me.

Or maybe you've even been to a church and experienced that sense of, everybody's looking at me like I'm strange. There's just this feeling that I don't belong and maybe I'm not good enough to be in this group of people.

Now, if you've ever felt like that, sadly, you're not alone. I think that as long as there has been churches, there's been people in those churches acting as if they had the right to decide who should be in and who should be out.

And so throughout all of history, there's been people wandering into churches and wandering out just as quickly because they didn't feel like they belonged. Now, I'm not just pointing the finger at those other churches that do that, because the reality is, if I'm really honest, there are people that I meet in my life, there are people that I see when I'm out at the shops or out with my friends, and deep down, I don't really want them to be sitting next to me the next Sunday in church.

For whatever reason, there's something about them that I don't really like, and I just don't think that they should be a part of the church community. And so if you're here this evening and you're feeling unwelcome, you're feeling like out of place, I want to start by saying sorry, because that's not how it's supposed to work.

[5 : 16] That's not what the church is supposed to be. I mean, in some senses, that's how the world works. You hang out with the people that you are like. You hang out with the people you get on with. So if you don't like lawn bowls, you don't hang out at the bowling club.

If you like boats, you hang out with people who like boats. If you skate, you hang out with people who skate. If you're into philosophy, you hang out with people who like to talk about philosophy. But the church is supposed to be different.

See, the church is supposed to be a group of people that have been gathered together by God, and the only thing that they've got in common is that Jesus has saved them. I mean, people should look at the church and go, it just doesn't make sense.

They should go, how is it possible that that guy and that girl, who are completely different, can have such a deep friendship. But the sad reality is, in churches all over the world right now, there are still people acting like they get to decide who's in and who's out.

Even across Australia today, there are people who want to know Jesus, who want to find out more, but feel unwelcome to walk into a building like this, because they're worried that they're going to get judged or looked down on.

[6 : 31] And that is terrible. But in there, in that what is a disgusting situation, there is a huge encouragement.

In that reality, is the best news that you have ever heard. Hiding in that unwelcome environment is the gospel.

And I want to show you why, from the passage that Helen read out for us. If you've got it in front of you, that'll be helpful. If not, you can listen and I'll read out the key bits. But in Mark chapter 10, in verse 13, this is what's going on.

It says, people were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. So you get it, it's a pretty simple scene. Jesus is the miracle worker. Jesus is the impressive teacher.

And so everybody wants to, you know, send their kids in so that they can maybe catch some of the magic. You know, if maybe Jesus puts their hands on them, then they'll get into the right private school. Or they want some of the good blessing, the good stuff that Jesus is offering.

[7 : 35] But the disciples get in the way pretty quickly. They're like, look, Jesus is busy. He's got things to do. And now, before we nail the disciples for being jerks, we've got to realize that we actually treat kids the same way now.

Like, we actually do the same sort of thing. At best, kids are something to be survived or tolerated. At worst, they're something to be avoided or pushed to the side. I mean, think about it. We have restaurants and cinemas and churches where kids aren't supposed to be. There are special places you can pay extra for the privilege of being free of the burden of children. We look down on them and it's almost logical. Because when you think about it, kids don't actually contribute anything, do they? They're kind of freeloaders. I mean, seriously, if you're a parent, and I am now, I'm six months into parenthood, and kids don't actually offer anything. They just take time and energy and resources from hardworking adults like you and me.

[8 : 36] And so in one sense, it's completely valid that the disciples go, these kids don't deserve any special treatment. They don't deserve front row seats for Jesus. There's more important people around.

Now, as I said, I've been a father for almost six months and my little boy has a pretty basic routine. He sleeps not as much as we want him to. He wakes up screaming because he's hungry. He eats a little bit. He throws up a little bit. He poos a little bit. And then he whinges and wriggles around on the floor. There's not a lot of contribution from him so far in our family unit. He doesn't help with chores. He doesn't pay rent. He just takes time and energy from me and Sal. Now, we love him, just so we're clear. But he's not a major contributor in our family. Now, imagine with me for a second that my wife wins a prize for two. It's an all-expenses-paid, first-class, holiday for two around the world, finest hotels, limousines, everything. [9 : 40] Now, which two members of my family deserve, let me underline that, deserve to go on that holiday? Now, you might be less selfish than me, but if we're really honest, it's fair to say that me and my wife deserve the holiday.

We're the ones who do the cleaning, we're the ones who change nappies, we're the ones who make our own way to the bathroom when that needs to happen. And so, it's fair enough that out of the three of us, we are the most deserving of that extra privilege.

Now, it's not that we don't love our boy, but we're the ones doing the work. And we're older, and we'll enjoy it more, and we'll appreciate it. It's not that our son's not important, it's just that he's less important than us.

Now, just so we're clear again, my boy comes first in our family because he needs to. But you can understand at least a little bit of what's going through the head of the disciples.

Now, they're not saying children are just unimportant and insignificant and don't matter. They're just saying children are less important. I mean, let's just remember who we're talking about here.

[10 : 55] This is Jesus. This is the miracle worker. This is the healer. This is the teacher. This is the son of God. And so they're thinking maybe there's more important people here who need to get to Jesus first.

I mean, he's not going to be around forever. We're going to make the most of his time. There could have been doctors or lawyers or politicians, you know, really important people.

And the disciples are doing exactly what we would probably do. We start sorting out who is the most important people, who are the most worthy people and we'll give them a shot at looking at Jesus first.

So the children in this passage and children in general don't deserve any special treatment from God. They don't deserve this free jump to the front of the queue pass. And interestingly, Jesus doesn't actually argue the point when he responds to his disciples.

I don't know if you noticed that. Jesus doesn't turn around and go, disciples, you idiots. Children do deserve my blessing. They are more important than everyone else. Let them to the front. Listen to what he does say back in the passage at verse 14.

[12 : 03] When Jesus saw this, he was indignant and he said to them, Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

What's Jesus' response? He says, let them come. He doesn't say let them come because they're the most important. He says, let them come. Even though they're unworthy, even though they're unimportant, even though they're unimpressive, he says, my blessing, my kingdom, all the stuff that

I want to give belongs to such as these.

His kingdom belongs to the childlike. Now, the amazing irony in this passage is that the same way that the disciples are looking down on these children and the same way that sometimes people in churches look down on other people as being unworthy or undeserving, that is exactly how God sees each and every one of us.

That is exactly how God sees even the disciples in this passage. Now, let me say that again because that's really important. The way we sometimes try and discern between who is more deserving of God's love and less deserving, we look at other people as less deserving.

[13 : 31] But when God sees us, he sees us as undeserving. He sees us as unworthy. He sees us as having no right whatsoever.

When God looks at you and me and every single one of us, he sees what the disciples see in these kids, people who don't deserve his blessing.

So on one level, if you're sitting in church tonight and you're feeling unwelcome, you're feeling like maybe you don't fit here, you're actually heading in the right direction.

God is giving you some insight into how he sees you. He's giving you a chance to look from his perspective and understand that no one deserves to be able to call God Father.

No one deserves to be able to call Jesus their Savior. No one deserves to be able to call Jesus their friend. And in this passage, the reason the children are unworthy is because they're children.

[14 : 33] All they need is a few years and they can deal with that issue but our issue is more significant. Our problem's not so easily fixed. See, we're unworthy of God because we spend our lives treating him like he doesn't matter.

We're unworthy because we act like the one who made us and keeps us alive is just a resource that we can use instead of a God who deserves to be obeyed. We don't do what he tells us to.

We do what he tells us not to do and the sad thing is even if we were to try and change now and become better people, even if we were to start obeying from this point forward, that doesn't change that we are disobedient people.

That doesn't change that up to this point in our lives and in reality from here forward, we're going to keep ignoring him and making choices that we know he doesn't want us to. We have a habit when we talk about God of thinking about good people and bad people.

We think of bad people as the people who murder or steal or abuse and good people are the ones who manage to avoid those serious bad things and those are the only two categories we've got.

[15 : 39] We've got good and bad but God has a higher standard than good. God is perfect in every way. There is nothing bad in him and he demands that if we would follow him, if we would call him father, if we would be a part of his family, then we need to be perfect as well.

Now you might be good but you are not perfect. You might be better than everyone else in this room, you might be the best person you know but you are still not perfect. Which means in God's eyes you're not good enough.

You don't deserve his blessing. You don't deserve all the good things that he has. Jesus is saying something really profound in these four verses. The kingdom of God he says, the blessing of God he says, belongs to such as these.

The church will be full of such as these. Heaven will be full of such as these. But what does that mean? What does it mean to receive the kingdom like a little child?

Well it's all the things that you spend your life trying to get out of. All the habits that you're trying to avoid. The dependence of children. The helplessness of children.

[17 : 02] See we live in a society where we value independence. We want our lives to be about what we can do. We want to be judged on our merits. We want to stand on our own two feet and we want what is fair and just for what we have done.

But Jesus is saying if God gives you what is fair and just for what you have done then you have no chance of getting all the good things that he wants to give you. Being a Christian is about recognizing embracing and rejoicing in the fact that you need Jesus' help.

I'll say that again. Being a Christian is about recognizing that you need Jesus' help embracing the fact that you need help from something outside yourself and rejoicing in the fact that God has provided that help that you need.

These children come to Jesus because they are confident that he will love them. Not confident that they deserve his love. Not confident that they have some right to his blessing.

But depending on the fact that he will love them in spite of how unimpressive they are. They bring nothing to the table. They just come eager and keen empty handed and Jesus welcomes them. [18:25] That is what it means to receive the kingdom like a child. It's about recognizing you don't deserve it and asking God to welcome you anyway. the gospel message is a message of unworthy people offered forgiveness and love through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

But don't mishear me when I say that. The fact that God has welcomed an imperfect person like me and the fact that tonight he might be ready to welcome an imperfect person like you doesn't mean that he's lowering his standards.

It doesn't mean that he looked and realized there was no perfect people and thought well if I just lower a bit and just get kind of the top tier of good people heaven will still be alright. God has not lowered his standards.

What it means is he loves you enough to pay the price that you're supposed to pay and instead give you his love and blessing. The famous author C.S.

Lewis calls it the great exchange. Jesus comes to earth and in his whole life he is perfectly obedient to God in heaven. He does everything that God requires of him and instead of the love and privilege position that he deserves in heaven he takes on the punishment that every one of us deserves for telling God that he doesn't matter.

[19:49] He takes on the judgment and punishment that is ours and then instead of receiving the punishment that is ours we are given the life and blessing that is his.

grace. It is the great exchange. If you're here and you're invited by someone maybe you're here because you're curious about God maybe you're here because you were just sick of saying no to that really persistent friend.

Whatever brought you to this room God was behind it. if you're feeling like you don't really belong right now good.

Because the reality is you don't deserve to be in God's family. You are unworthy of his love and forgiveness forgiveness.

But so is everyone else around you. God sees your life. He knows who you are.

[20:56] He knows the deep dark secrets that you hope no one ever finds out and he says I love you anyway. He says if you would just stop trying to be good enough stop thinking at least I'm not as bad as other people and would just like a child depend on him he would welcome you with open arms.

It doesn't matter what other people say to you no one else gets to decide whether or not you're good enough for heaven. Jesus is saying now you're not but I want to welcome you anyway. If you call yourself a Christian if you're sitting in this room and you've been following Jesus for a while I just want to be clear that here is what you're saying according to Jesus.

You're saying that God loves me even though there is nothing in me that makes me worthy of it. That's what a Christian is. Someone who recognizes they don't deserve God's love but gets it anyway.

And so if that's you maybe you need to be reminded that you are never in a position to look at someone else as being less deserving of God's love than you are.

If you look at someone and see them as unworthy that's right, that's what the Bible says but you've got to see yourself right alongside them because that's what the gospel says. You don't deserve God's love but you get it because God loves you.

[22:27] You get it because he chooses to love you. God loves you. And maybe he is challenging some of us tonight to maybe be a little bit more humble in the way that we follow him.

To maybe be a little bit more welcoming. To make this a place that anyone would feel comfortable to walk into regardless of what they're wearing or how they talk or how strange this all seems.

we started off tonight lamenting the fact that churches are often unwelcoming places, that they're often exclusive and I said that hiding in that reality was good news.

The fact that the church is full of people like that, people who make others feel unwelcome, it's not a good thing but at very least it's proof that everyone sitting in church is just as unworthy as you.

If you have ever been made to feel unwelcome in a church, if you have ever been told by Christians that you don't deserve God's love, that you don't deserve to be a part of their community, I think that's actually evidence that they don't deserve it either.

[23 : 42] And that's the proof that it's all about God and it's all about what God has done. Plus, you feeling that unworthiness is actually a necessary starting point.

If you're going to be able to receive it like a child, you've got to recognise that you've got nothing to offer, that it doesn't matter how good you're going to be from now on, it doesn't matter how good you've been until now, you've got to recognise it is all about God's love for you.

It is all about the fact that he sent Jesus to die for you and it is all about the fact that Jesus rose again for you. It is not and it will not ever be about what you have or haven't done.

Lastly, you being in this room now is good news because if God can welcome me, even though I'm imperfect, and if God can welcome you, even though you're imperfect, and even though we are completely different people with different lives and different experiences, maybe somebody else will walk into this room one time and see if God can forgive that guy and that girl, then maybe he can forgive me as well.

Jesus rebukes his disciples in this passage because they block the way for children that he had already chosen to love, that he had already chosen to welcome. There is nothing and no one that God will let get in the way of you coming to him.

[25 : 19] Nothing you have done and no other person's opinion of you can block how much God loves you. The challenge for you tonight is, are you ready like a child?

Are you ready to admit that you have nothing to offer to him? To recognize that more than that, you are undeserving of his love, but you are actually deserving of his punishment, and yet still he wants to welcome you.

He wants to offer you something better. The question for you tonight is, will you accept his love with open hands like a child?

will you receive the blessing that he wants to give you? Let's pray. Father God, we want to acknowledge that there is so much in our lives that is not worthy of you.

That every single one of us in this room spends time acting like we're in charge, acting like we get to make our own decisions and you don't matter. And God, we want to thank you that even though we are so disobedient, you still love us.

[26 : 43] We want to thank you for being willing to send Jesus to take our punishment. We want to thank you that it's not about what other people think of us, it's about your love which you have shown us in Jesus.

God, I want to pray that if there are people sitting in this room right now who don't yet know what it is to be welcomed by you, to be forgiven by you, to be loved by you, who don't yet know what it is to call you Father, who don't know what it is to be sure that you have reserved a place for them in heaven, Lord, I pray that tonight you would remove the barriers and you would welcome them. God, we thank you so much for your love and for sending Jesus. Amen.