

**They had walked a long way that day.** Everyone was tired, but they hadn't stopped; kept on going by the thought of getting home. Every village they went through they saw so much work they could have done, beggars sitting by the road, people in need. But Jesus hadn't wanted to be recognized. He just put his head down and kept on walking. Only out in the countryside did he open up and start talking. He talked until the disciples wished for his silence, for he talked of terrible things, of betrayal and death. You just can't take too much of that.

And it made no sense. Why, only a few days ago Peter, James and John had come back down the mountain afire with conviction that this man they followed, this extraordinary man, this Jesus was in truth the Beloved Son of the most high God. Their hopes were running high that things might really be starting, that the time was soon coming when God would overthrow the Romans and set his people free, that they, his followers, would receive real power to work wonders. Then suddenly Jesus starts talking like this. He really was impossible sometimes!

**As they got closer** to Capernaum, the disciples walked slower and slower, but Jesus seemed to gain in energy. So when they stopped yet again for a drink he just left them and set off on his own. Without him, the mood of the disciples plummeted. They argued. The others resented Peter, James and John for going up the mountain in the first place – especially Andrew, Peter's brother! Judas, Matthew, all of them knew that they were the most important to Jesus' mission, and knew how to set him right.

Finally they dragged themselves **home**. Peter's wife and children ran out to meet them, a delicious meal was on the table, and for a while their argument was forgotten. It was only later, as they sat over their cups of wine, that they found it hard to look each other in the eye. Jesus asked, "What were you arguing about on the road?", and not one of them could bear to answer. If only he would shout at them, anything would have been better than his look of disappointment.

But then he did something that none of them expected, and none of them forgot. He beckoned to Peter's daughter, his littlest, only 2 years old, and she tottered over with a big grin and sat on his knee.

"If you want to be first you must be last", he said. "If you want to lead you must serve." Yes, yes, he always went on about serving, so that made sense. But then he said something really strange.

**"Whoever welcomes a little child, in my name, welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."**

And with that he picked up the wee girl, gave her a big hug, and carried her off to put her to bed.

After he left the disciples exploded with confusion. What on earth did he mean by that? How could a little child represent Jesus, the Messiah, very Son of God? I mean, children were sweet and the Torah tells us to teach them. But they weren't important, they were just a man's property.

At least that gave them something new to argue about!

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

Or as the Message puts it, "Whoever **embraces** one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me – God who has sent me."

We've been doing a bit of a theme lately **at Leith** ... Can anyone remember what Richard has been talking about? Remembering a sermon. Yes, I know it's a challenge!

**Love your neighbour.** A few weeks ago Richard was talking about how loving our neighbours is a crazy idea in a way, and is not easy. Chris followed that up with the mental decision we need to make to do that. Last week Richard really tipped it upside down by challenging the Good Samaritan story and the idea that we need to have all the resources, all the answers, in order to help and love other people. I want to follow on with this outrageous statement by Jesus that in loving children we are loving him, in welcoming children we welcome God himself.

**When I became a mum** I really struggled for a long time to truly value the enormous amount of work that caring for little children requires. There was part of me that got frustrated with their constant demands and kept arranging time off from them so that I could get on with actually achieving something. So I took my babies off to Polytech classes with me, and wrote assignments while they slept. Changing nappies and singing nursery rhymes was all very well, but it wasn't **ministry**, it wasn't **mission**, it was just doing what had to be done.

I would remember Jesus' words in Matthew 5: Love your enemies ... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" everyone does that. It took a while for it to really sink in that caring for children is one of the most important things us human beings ever get to do.

It's not just that we love children because they're ours, or they're especially cute and lovable – sometimes they are, and sometimes they're not! We love them also because we love God through them, and are ourselves loved by God through them.

Now, some of us had had these years of caring for little ones. Others of us hope to in the future, and others live with the grief of not having had children of your own. And here we are, as a family of God, with 30 children out there in the hall. What an awesome privilege and responsibility God has given us in those 30 children.

And there are **others**, the ones who come from time to time, the little ones who come on Friday mornings, the young people in our 2 Youth Groups, and the children who will live in the house that we are building in Uganda. These are all part of our family.

And all the children that we connect with during the week, at school, at Playcentre, our grandchildren and cousins around the world. These, too, are part of our life, our mission in the world. Then there are the others who God will be bringing into our family next year, or the year after. These children are our core business here at Leith Valley. When they go out to Kidztime they don't leave church, they are still being the church, out there, as they eat their bikkies and push trains on the track.

**Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me.**

Gosh, **worshiping was hard when our children were small.**

Constant distraction. But there was a precious gift God gave me, through the frustration. Here's what I wrote a few years ago, back in Wainuiomata when Daniel would run around up the front while Chris was leading worship.

*"It is my knowing that a toddler peeking out between the legs of the lectern is saying more about God than the minister's sermon. It is my awe at watching the child in my arms solemnly take and eat the communion bread, one arm firmly wrapped around my shoulders. It is my sense of privilege to be so close to such pure, direct expressions of God. So you could say that I worship through my children, allowing them to be sacrament for me.*

*And then the sacred moment is passed, and we have to find the toilet, or whatever. There's nothing like little children for bringing you down to earth, back to basics. The God who speaks through them is a God of incredible direct love, a running body-slam hug kind of love. This is a God who is known through bodies, hunger that hurts, the sheer delight of a warm bath, the grime and slime of everyday life. This is a God who couldn't care less whether your socks match, or how many reports you write, but adores you absolutely. This is a God who laughs and laughs at bursting bubbles, who treasures worms, and special moments, and even me."*

Leith Valley church is being invited to be a part of a Presbyterian project to promote excellence in children's ministry, It's called **Kids Friendly**. The Kids Friendly Coach is a woman called Jill Kayser, and I warmly commend her to you. Last year at this time I went up to Auckland to spend a month with Jill, and I came back immensely impressed with the work she is doing, and her vision for the church. She offers coaching to churches, up and down the country, and the Dunedin Presbytery has contracted her to work with 6 Parishes each year. It's your turn next year. She'll be meeting with Session, Richard, Fran, and the children's ministry leaders, and helping them work out what's great at Leith and what could be better. She will inspire you, and gently stretch you. You see, it's not just about what happens out there in Kidztime. It's about who we are as a church, how we think about ourselves, how we worship

Let me read you the Kids Friendly ideal that the church needs to have "a heart for children', In a Kids Friendly church, children are **welcomed**, celebrated and nurtured, and children can explore, learn and experience the love of Christ. It is a place where children **belong** and **participate** in the life and worship of the faith community, and where children are **valued** for the immense love and life they bring to the whole church family.

One thing in particular that I appreciate about Jill's approach is that she passionately believes in nurturing the ministry **of** children, not just for children. She challenges churches to encourage children to have a voice in the church, to exercise leadership, and to share in the church's outreach and mission. I gave you a taste of it this morning, I hope, by involving children in leading prayers, and choosing music. Sure, they need practice, but it makes all the difference, for them, to be involved.

Do we want children to see worship as the boring bit before Kidztime? Is worship something that adults do while the children sit and watch?

No, no, no!

Worship is the whole people of God being the body of Christ. We need the children in order to be a whole body, and they need us oldies in order to be the whole body.

So I'd like to encourage you to keep on growing in your life as a community, as a family. Leith is a wonderful, rich, welcoming place. How blessed are we! What blessings God has poured out on us, and will continue to pour out in this place. Praise God, and thank you for the opportunity to be a part of you for these years.

I want to finish with something else I wrote some years ago. You all know the '**Footprints**' poem, a classic for fridge magnets and little wooden wall plaques. You know, how a person has been walking down the beach with Jesus, but when they look back the person only sees one set of footprints in the times of their life which were hardest and they felt most alone. And Jesus says, 'There, I carried you.'

Well, I wrote a sequel. This is Footprints part 2.

*Then, Jesus and I looked back at another part of the beach, another time in my life when I had felt abandoned by him. There, his footprints disappeared, and all we could see were many little footprints, where small feet had run and jumped, where little hands had dug and drawn and collected shells. The sand was chaotic! Even my own footprints were mostly obscured.*

*"Where were you then, Lord?" I asked tearfully.*

*"What!?" he replied, "Don't tell me you never noticed! All those footprints are mine."*

*Then he grinned at me. "Thank you", he said. "I had a wonderful time!"*