

Children and the Bible

Sometimes we read scripture as if it were just about adults and the history of their changing relationships with God. But one of the most extraordinary things we learn about the relationship between human beings and God is that God can work deeply and intimately in the lives of children too.

For example, God calls the young Samuel directly in 1 Samuel 3. Although he does not at once know what is happening, Samuel hears God speaking to him directly and responds. He is the one who brings the word of God to his teacher and master, Eli. Others prove more reticent: when Jeremiah argues that he is too young to speak for God (Jeremiah 1. 6) the Lord tells him not to be afraid and gives him the gift of God's word. More than this, God tells Jeremiah 'before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations' (Jeremiah 1.5). This tells us that God knows us intimately from our earliest beginning and equips and engifts us to do the divine work from the very start of our lives. Yet how often do we *listen* to children and stop to think what God might be telling and showing us through them?

When we consider what the Gospels tell us about Jesus as a child, we find more clues. The unborn John leaps in his mother's womb when the pregnant Mary comes to visit. Even a baby can recognise the presence of God, - in John's case a recognition of the Lord which gives him the confidence to proclaim the coming of the one who is greater than he, down at the river Jordan. It is interesting that we are given a few glimpses of Jesus growing up. We are told that he grows in wisdom and favour with God (Luke 2.52 and compare the same words in 1 Samuel 2.26). We also find him talking with the teachers in the Temple, while his parents rush around frantically trying to find him, forgetting, as Jesus reminds them, that he has a vocation from God to follow and to fulfil (Luke 2.41-51).

It is perhaps not surprising then that Jesus insists that children be allowed to approach him, when the disciples, in keeping with the values of the day, insist that Jesus' ministry is not for them (Mark 10.13) Even more shocking, Jesus privileges children, who are otherwise at the bottom of society's heap. We must serve them if we want to serve God (Mark 9.37) and we must become as them if we want to enter heaven (Mark 10.15). The last verse (v16) of this passage contains an action we should not overlook: Jesus lays his hands on the children and blesses them. This blessing is not just a patronising formality. Our children are called and blessed by God. God's desire is invested in them. We must love, serve and learn from them.

