

I brought along the slide projector to show off a few images of Jesus welcoming the children.

#1 We had an image kind of like this in my home church in Timaru. Scandinavian Jesus with halo. As a child I thought the finger was a bit like the one the teacher sometimes used when telling me off. I like the guy on the top left – raising his hands in disbelief at the chaotic scene of the children mobbing the Lord – I think I can hear him muttering to himself, ‘heaven forbid, whatever will he allow next, guitars in church?’



#2 This one’s more like it – at least in sentiment. Although Jesus still looks like some sort of idealised European propaganda...

I’ve seen versions of these kinds of windows all over the place. There was always a mixed message though – yes, the children are being reminded that they can cuddle up to the Jesus who bids them come as they are, but in fact the way worship was conducted in the spaces where these windows were erected was very adult-orientated, and the children were given a very clear message that you are to be seen and not heard. Was that the messaging in your childhoods? Over the years I have heard plenty of stories from mothers

of little ones who simply stopped attending to church while their children were little because of the looks they received if the unregulated voice of their little ones drifted into the tightly structured liturgy. Let the children come to me, says Jesus, do not stop them. But we are trying to worship say the grown-ups. So are they, says Jesus.



#3 This is better! This is African or Pasifika or even Maori Jesus – still dressed funny, but he’s cool. All kinds of kids feel there is room for them with this Jesus. The Chinese girl in the front is hiding some flowers behind her back – maybe she picked them without checking with the adults... if she’d picked the ones in the foreground, she would have ruined the painting. Do you think an adult frowned when she spontaneously grabbed that bunch? I bet!

See the little girl – it is as if she is talking to Jesus and about to tell him she has a gift for him... I think Jesus is about to break out in an enormous smile...

Did you grow up with an image of Jesus grinning because of his loving being in your company? Probably not.

I think I finally learned to fully embrace that image when I became a grandfather. I know what happens to my face whenever I see my grandsons – it lights up. And their faces light up. And it all goes a bit crazy for a bit and my daughter raises her eyebrows. I think my face lights up like Jesus’ face lit up when the children gathered around him – and I think that’s the point we older ones are meant to get here.

I wonder if this is the great gift the church has to offer our youngest generation... our faces lighting up, and our willingness to let things go a bit crazy for a bit whenever we see them. When our faces light up it is like you can just about see halos of holiness above our heads.



#4 Yep – he would have grinned. This is 60’s American Jesus without the flowers in his hair – you simply can’t have Jesus with short hair! It just doesn’t work!

I was fortunate, I think, to get it that Jesus loved me at an early age. Growing up in my large family I often had the feeling that I didn’t fit. I seemed to be the child who attracted the wrong sort of attention. I couldn’t get it right. I developed a need to be needed and wore some of that vulnerability on my face. It attracted some unwelcome attention in my early high school years. But at church, as a child, I was told the story of a little boy with his playlunch providing the food for 5000 people, and I heard of another boy who had a slingshot he could use to repel the lions that threatened the sheep, and later, stop a giant in his tracks. And I heard of another

boy, or was it a lamb, who was lost and carried home over the shoulders of the good shepherd. Jesus smiled upon me and I felt welcome in his circle. Those experiences carried me a long way.

I'm interested in the line 'whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' I've been wondering if the call is here is to recover a posture in life that has wonder as a working element in the daily rhythm. I started to re-enter some of my childhood memories to see what it was that I could see that made those moments stay with me.

I was remembered 8 year-old me watching ants at my great-aunt's home in Takapuna. Aunty May had put out bait on milk bottle caps. Do you remember the silver milk bottle caps? They had an impression on them with the date the milk was bottled – I loved running my thumbnail across the top of the tight cap and erasing the numbers. It took a certain sort of technique to depress the cap in such a way that it could be eased off from the sides and still be intact. If you got it wrong your finger or thumb pierced the surface and dipped into the milk. Aunty May had had good technique. The lids were intact and when inverted, they became a low-sided vessel to contain the bait. My brother and I marvelled at the endless procession of ants coming to gather a morsel and deliver the fateful package in another procession all the way back to the underground nest. I wrote a poem about it:

Hours

when I was a child I could sit for hours
staring at the trail of ants going this way and that
as one ant passed another it paused
as if bowing in respect for the queen
time did not go slower then, rather
I was contracted to wonder
I am no longer a child
I have not sat for hours with any one thing
and my life is speeding away

Speeding away. I remember how slow life was when I was a child. There was room. There was time. I was contracted to wonder. Childhood was a time of widening, of pausing, of pondering – and believing in the possibility of things... and the possibilities were endless. I lived with my arms out wide. Now... it is all too fast and much of the wonder of things is lost in the reduction of almost everything to the pragmatic. Functionality, endless lists, ticking boxes, looming deadlines, not enough hours in the day, and that is just the testimony of those in their retirement years! What about the years when they were employed! Speeding away... Is it to the wonderers that the kingdom of God belongs?



This is Finn, one of my grandsons. He developed a peeking game that he invited me into on the stairwell. He was overcome with the joy of it. He, more than anyone, has invited me to stop whatever I am doing, whatever I had to be doing, whatever everyone else thought I had to be doing. He, more than anyone, has invited me to dwell in the wonder of the world through little eyes. And he has attended to my well-being – he has ministered to me. I've gained glimpses of Jesus present through his ministry of being wide-eyed. I was discussing this with Geoff New, who teaches at the Knox Centre in Dunedin. He told me of how his grandson led him to the

small places behind furniture. He shared something he had written about it, and it reminded me of the green pastures line in Psalm 23, so I took Geoff's words and formed them into a poem with a question at the end...

To let the little child come to me

[Geoff New words tweaked just a little by Martin Stewart]

One thing he regularly does is take me by the hand
to guide me to something of great interest to him.
Often, when we get to what he wants to show me,
he will pull on my hand to sit me on the ground with him.
He brings me down to his level
to see as he sees, and experience what he experiences.

What might appear to be ordinary to an adult
is a source of great delight to this small child.
A leaf on the ground holds as much delight
as seeing an elephant.
A toy becomes the means
to play a game of let's-pretend.
A book is read by pointing to colours, in such a way
that a never-before-told story unfolds between us.
He takes me to small spaces behind furniture.
He changes how I speak, what I see, and how I feel.
He shows me the world through his child eyes
and helps me experience the world with new delight.
He changes my guard-like attitude
with his guide-like example.
[And my questions]:
Is this how a soul is to be restored?
Is this how you will restore *my* soul O Lord?

In all my adult busyness I had forgotten what it had been like to see the world through the eyes of a child. I remember parenting my children – but actually, I barely remember – I only have snippets. I was a fairly involved parent compared to my father, but I was always under pressure – time was limited, work was demanding, and I was so tired. When Finn came along time was limited, work was demanding, and I was so tired, but I had grown up a bit – or should I say, I had grown down, and I knew that I had an opportunity to attend to how I needed to be. I have been describing Finn as my teacher. Now he has a little brother. I can take the course again! Adults tend to make the kingdom of God into a set of propositions, or rules, or gateways, or ideological dreams. Children are not interested in any of that. Here's what Jesus proposes: children, with their way of seeing and adventuring, *already* have a significant foothold in the kingdom. The kingdom belongs to them! *Belongs!* Jesus is saying that if you want to understand the kingdom of God you have to crouch down alongside its inhabitants, the *tangata whenua* of the kingdom, these children, your teachers, and watch and see through their peculiarly gifted eyes and ears and imaginations. *Then* you will be able to get what he is on about. Only then. How about that! In his little uncomplicated self, little Finn showed me that he is almost completely attuned to wonder as a key part of daily living. He is alive. He is as far from being dead as you can possibly get, not only greatly distant from the old age that we hope he gets to, but also greatly distant from any idea that life should be limited. He is alive as well as living! I'm sure that if we older ones can recover a similar attitude of openness to the wonder of things, then we will also be kept young and open, and saved from apathy or cynicism, and better able to negotiate change, and more attuned to the way God refreshes and restores our souls every day. Unfortunately, life and systems will gradually work to erode Finn's capacity to live so freely in the land of seeing – just as it happened to us. The days have already started coming when Finn is growing in fear and having a sense of life's limitations – he is almost four years old now and he has begun testing the weight of mortality. The full impact of things is still a long way off, and even when these things come to visit his life, I hope he isn't dominated by them. While I can, I look to him and his brother as guides of the kingdom way, and I will continue to learn from them, so that when necessary, as their grandfather, I might be better equipped to guide them in the ways of wonder as the systems around them insist that they 'grow up.' But for now I need their guidance. I am back at school. I need to do this. I need their help. I will never get there if I insist that they be seen and not heard. Amen.

#5

