

**Sermon preached at Marlborough Road Methodist Church
at the Morning Service on Sunday 20th September 2015
by Rev Rob Anning**

One Hundred and Fifty Years Old

Your 12 months of celebrating the age of this building is slowly drawing to a close: just a few weeks to go now.

As I began my preparation for today, I went in search of what was happening in 1865 as this building was being opened:

- Alice in Wonderland was first published.
- The Salvation Army was founded, coming out of the Christian Mission with their Methodist roots.
- The first speed limits were introduced in the UK and set at 2mph in the town and 4mph in the countryside.
- The Matterhorn was first climbed.
- The first lengths of the transatlantic telegraph cable were laid.
- The first woman doctor graduated from university.
- The lyrics for the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers" was written.

And then I turned my mind to thinking what those Methodists of 150 years ago had in mind when they built this place? I turned to the excellent history written by Trevor Parry and Alan Vincent which does give us some sort of insight, to be found on your website.

For what we are celebrating is not really the building, but the people who have entered this place: those who have worshipped, prayed, found comfort and encouragement; those who have discovered something more about Jesus and the Kingdom of God; those who have celebrated new life and new relationships; those who have been fed here, both spiritually and physically; those who have sung, and played and exercised. And the list could go on and on.

Then I turned to the lectionary gospel reading for today from Mark 9 verses 30 to 37, which encourages Jesus' followers to be humble, to play a servant role, and to accept the child that Jesus places among them: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9 v 35).

In the gospels, Jesus uses children to make a point on a regular basis. This is because in Jesus' day, children were very much towards the bottom of the social pile and were certainly expected to be seen, to work, and not be heard.

In John's gospel, the bread and fish to feed the 5,000 comes from a child, making the point that even the youngest can make a huge contribution, and are equally important in the bigger picture.

In Mark 10 v 13, when the parents bring their children to Jesus to be blessed, Jesus urges

the disciples to “let the children come to me, do not hinder them. For whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God *like* a child, shall not enter it”.

And in today’s reading from Mark 9, Jesus places a child amongst them, and in this case urges the disciples not to be LIKE the child but to WELCOME the child, to ACCEPT the child: “He put his arms round the child, and said to them: ‘Whoever welcomes in my name one of these children, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me but also the one who sent me’” (Mark 9 vs 36 and 37).

Interestingly, as is often the case in Mark’s writing of his gospel, he intersperses Jesus teaching with practical examples of what Jesus did in order to emphasis his teaching. So in Mark 9 v 14ff, Jesus heals a little boy. Jesus finds time for the child, Jesus shows the child is as important as anyone else. Jesus turns the conventions of his day upside down.

During this year of celebration, while giving thanks for the past, I know your minds have been firmly fixed on the future: What comes next? What shall we do with our building? Which direction does God want us to go? How can we as a church serve the present age? Be encouraged: You are not the first to ask this about this building? Read through the history of Marlborough Road, and over and over again, Church Council reports suggest these questions were asked.

In this day and age, we don’t quite know when we reach adulthood: is it 18 or 21? Or if we can vote at 16, is that the age adulthood begins? And when did this church “become of age”? The answer is not 129 years ago; the answer is that the church has continued returning to it’s beginning, and re-invent itself for it’s own age, to be relevant to it’s times. And that includes the use of this building. It has been a series of returning circles.

It has been about “becoming a child” again: with questions, with renewed energy, a desire to explore, to learn. In other words, to become a child again.

Today’s readings, both Mark 10, accepting the child, and Philippians 2: “Look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others”, provide us with a guide for the way forward.

Of course, we need to pray, to think, to listen to God, each other and our community. We need to discern the will of the Holy Spirit. We may need to consider partnerships.

But surely the broad theme of what this building, and you as the church should be about, should be something to do with “building the Kingdom of God”. For over the 150 years, every week, and sometimes more often, people in this place have prayed: “Thy Kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven”. Have they been serious about this prayer? Are we still serious about this prayer?

I would want to say that should be the starting place: How do we serve the present age both as building and as people so that the Kingdom of God is increased in partnership with Him?

Then we should consider how we welcome the children as suggested by our reading today. I don’t just mean small human beings; I mean the humble and the powerless: those

disenfranchised, the poor, the rejected, the lonely, the neglected. These are today's children. There are plenty out there.

The actions that we take every day (or fail to take) have ramifications on "the least".

The Kingdom of God breaks into the world in the least likely of places. And in the gospels, those most honoured in the Kingdom are the servants — and the least.

God will receive those who receive the child. If we do this then it gives us access to power, the power of the one who sent Jesus.

'Whoever welcomes in my name one of these children, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me but also the one who sent me' (Mark 9 vs 36 and 37).