

Christ Church Grammar School Staff Service; 22 January 2009

Psalm 8; Mk 9:36-37, 10:14c-15

The gift of children – Richard Treloar

Can it really be 9.00am on Thursday, 22 January? Can this moment have possibly arrived so soon? If you're anything like me, the weeks either side of Christmas seem to have been on fast forward – even the cricket matches are shorter these days, only 20 overs! The tennis has barely begun in Melbourne, and yet here we are on the brink of a new school year; perhaps it doesn't feel quite right... At least a long weekend might soften the blow!

I know many of you have already begun preparing for the weeks ahead, from home, or here on campus; for others today is the first day of a new or renewed professional chapter.

More even than the tyranny of the calendar and the clock, of course, the thing that draws us back together – whether as teaching or support staff, chaplains or administrators – is the children: our ministry to them, certainly; but also, I would suggest, their ministry to us.

Continental philosopher, Jean-Luc Marion, distinguishes between 'idols' – those things which reflect back to society its own needs and expectations – and 'icons', through which the fresh light of a larger reality can shine, in what he calls its 'provocative otherness'.¹ How does our culture view children, I wonder: as idols, or icons? How do we receive the gift of them in our daily life and work?

The Christmas holidays we've just enjoyed celebrate the gift of a *particular* child. But, as Alison and Liz, and every parent knows, the birth of *any* child signifies a new frontier, which is at once the limit of present experience, and the extension of what is coming to be.

Australian Roman Catholic theologian, Anthony Kelly, lists several ways in which children serve as icons, through which light from beyond might shine. First, by their very being, children constantly reveal to us the generativity of the universe. They are a living witness, embodying the intimacy, ecstasy, and fruitfulness of our human existence.

Second, as a focus of wonder for this in-breaking of the new, and along with the gift and promise of it, children call the whole human family to new responsibility. As recent images from Gaza remind us, the sheer fact of children demands a new vision of human community, and reconciliation between those whose murderous and self-referential demands make the world a dangerous place for the innocent and vulnerable. The unique face of each newborn, irreducible in its otherness, insists that we make room for *this* other, drawing us out of ourselves. The tears of a child cry out for an assurance that all will be well, shaming and provoking us to construct the conditions of peace, care, and justice that will not betray such promises.

¹ As cited by Anthony J Kelly, 'Spirituality and the Child', in *Spirituality in the Lives of Children and Adolescents: Some Perspectives*, edited by M de Souza and W Wing Han Lamb (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2008; *Interface* 10.2), 12-22, and here at 13.

And third, children pose to us a question: how will this unique new presence overflow into the existence of parents, family, society? How will the event of each child be played out in the event of creation itself? And because the answer is not and cannot be pre-determined, children inspire in us waiting, fidelity, and hope.

I'm sure the parents and staff of our School could add to such a list.

But, as we begin this new year together, can we open ourselves again to what the children in our care might reveal to us as icons: what they might show us of the ceaseless generativity of the universe; how they might call us to new responsibility and reconciliation; the light that might be shed through them on what it is we wait and hope for, and believe in?

Doubtless there'll be days when all we wait for is to return them to their parents! But even then, have they something new to teach us, or something to remind us of: that we are all needy, fragile children of God – children of the universe, we might say, hoping that a healing, forgiving love is at its heart.

In the tradition we draw on here, and which is expressed variously in all we do across the campus, Jesus, himself the firstborn of all creation, the eternal Son of the One he called Father, reminds us that because children are not yet full of themselves, they anticipate the character of the Kingdom of God as those who are most receptive to it. The suggestion that anyone who does not receive the kingdom as a child shall not enter it, as we heard in our reading, would have been highly subversive with respect to both Jewish and Hellenistic sensibilities of Jesus' day: the suggestion that wisdom and observance of the law were not the primary means of grace, after all, but rather that openness of heart and mind, that instinct to receive everything as gift.

Indeed, by virtue of such unapologetic dependence, trust, and powerlessness, these 'little ones' who are ever the object of God's special concern, have been described as the '*real presence* of Christ – a living sacrament of the kingdom of heaven.'² Thus can Jesus say, 'whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me.'

As Kelly observes,

the phenomenon of the child refreshes spirituality at its roots. In a world of violent competition [he writes] and the exponential growth of problems . . . the child calls for the rebirth of wonder, trust[,] and playful contentment within the great womb of life and time . . . the inexhaustible mystery of what has been so uncannily given.³

May whatever refreshment our spirits have gained from the summer break, be more than matched by the privilege of welcoming children into our workplace each day, and may we never cease to learn of God's majesty from the mouths of infants.

² Robin Maas, as cited with original emphasis by Kelly, 'Spirituality and the Child', 20.

³ 'Spirituality and the Child', 21-22.