

63th International Meeting of the Medicine for the Whole Person

August 17th to 20th 2011, Wilderswil, Switzerland

The Little Children are Big

What does the gospel of Luke tell us about the topic of children?

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What does the gospel tell us about children?

What does Jesus have for us to discover on this subject? Or rather, what would he have us discover, for we are hard of hearing!

To find out, I decided to browse through the gospel of Luke. Why Luke's gospel? Why not the other three?

Firstly, because I don't have the same capacity for work as Patrick Défontaine: several years ago, when we asked Patrick to do a study on "Violence in the bible", he reread the bible from beginning to end. As I am not as studious as Patrick, one gospel was long enough for me.

And why choose Luke's gospel? Because he is the only evangelist who tells us about Jesus as a child and even before his birth: while he was still in Mary's womb he had an effect on people around him. It seemed to me a good sign that one of the chroniclers of Jesus' life talked about this moving effect on us of children who are not yet born: a gold star for Luke. Let us meander with him while we meditate this morning.

But, before we tackle the meat of the subject, I should, if I'm honest, tell you why I am doing the bible study this morning. It might seem strange to you that the Équipe asked an agnostic to tell you what has inspired him in the Bible.

Is the bible only for believers?

The Équipe met in Strasbourg last September. We reflected about the way the meditation happens in the morning: what role should be given to silence which is a spiritual, not necessarily a religious exercise? What importance should be given to

prayer and to the singing of hymns, which are specifically religious practices? The Équipe concluded that the morning meditation should not mean that religion is imposed on all those present: Paul Tournier held that it is not necessary to be a Christian or even a believer to try and practise Medicine of the Person. He thought that the Bible was first and foremost an authoritative account of mankind, not of God. This means that the bible does not have a message just for believers. It doesn't belong to them. As with all books of wisdom, its place is as a source for all men seeking the light.

These thoughts led logically to the Équipe asking me to do one of the bible studies: someone who doubts the existence of a being we call God, someone who doesn't believe at all that that intriguing man, Jesus is in any way supernatural.

I wanted to explain this to you before I make any comments on the gospel. But I also wanted to start by telling you how much the gospel is a valuable text for me. Even if parts of it are obscure, I don't think there exists anywhere in western culture better illumination for people who are seeking the meaning of life. The words and the actions of Jesus are deeply attractive to me; this man from Nazareth is warm-hearted, righteous, very courageous, and doesn't take sides. Many aspects of his astonishing personality, I find particularly appealing:

- He is a free spirit, therefore perceived by some as a rebel.
- He says what he thinks and gets straight to the point, caring not one jot for diplomacy.
- He takes a hard line against important people and those in authority.
- He is non-violent.
- With his little band of followers, he lives the life of a vagabond. Clearly, he loves walking.
- He is a wonderful teller of tales.
- He takes malicious pleasure in being mysterious, and above all paradoxical (what he says about children is a complete paradox, as we will see shortly).
- He is not an invincible Rambo. He does succumb to distress and is not ashamed to show it.
- His words are often poetical.
- He is wonderfully deadpan: I often laugh as I imagine scenes in the gospel.
- Above all, he understands all the problems of man and of society.

What a great being! I love all of this!

What can he teach us about children?

1 - Even in his mother's womb, the child is a person who relates to those around him.

The pregnant Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth who is "very old" (Luke 1.7). The young Mary goes on this visit "not long" after hearing from Gabriel that she is expecting a child (Luke 1.39). Her pregnancy is therefore in its earliest stages. An ultrasound wouldn't have shown much, maybe a beating heart. Not yet a thinking brain. And yet this tiny being, barely formed, is already a person, since his very existence changes the behaviour of others: we are told that John the Baptist "jumped for joy" in the womb of the elderly Elizabeth (Luke 1.44). He was only 6 months from conception. As for Elizabeth, she understood immediately that her young cousin was going to be a mother. One can just begin to imagine the emotional embrace of these two Mediterranean ladies.

What happened? Psychoanalysts might say today that the unconscious of these two babies and their mothers communicated in some way. But the psychoanalytical "explanation" doesn't really matter. What matters, and what is reported by Luke, is that even before it is born, a baby exists as a social being. It communicates. Some of us have experienced that ourselves, haven't we?

2 - The most important duty of a grown-up is to give children their independence or autonomy.

We are all chatterboxes. Sometimes, it would be better if we shut up, instead of talking incessantly about our personal and professional affairs, even though language itself is handy when carrying out those affairs. We would do better to remain silent and only start talking when we have something to say about the most important things in our lives: our children. In any case, that is what Luke seeks to convey symbolically as he tells us the painful story of Zechariah.

Zechariah is a critical soul. When an angel comes to tell him that his wife Elizabeth is expecting a child, even though she is sterile and very old, he doesn't believe him (Luke 1.5-25). As punishment for his disbelief, Zechariah is immediately rendered mute. When the baby is born, the unfortunate father still does not recover the power of speech. Eight days later, still no progress: he is still aphasic. One might suppose that the doctors around at that time might have diagnosed a stroke, and that they would have been pessimistic about the chances of any recovery. We can only begin to imagine the frustration and humiliation of the new father. And then comes the time when the baby's name must be chosen, for they are preparing to circumcise him. Zechariah has a tablet brought to him and writes "His name is John". Immediately he is able to speak again.

What is the meaning of this story of a medically improbable aphasia? Perhaps it means that there is no more important task in a man's destiny than to give to one's child an identity, that is to say to create a person distinct from his/her parents, a person who is unique and free.

After examining only the first of the 24 chapters in Luke, we see that the evangelist accords a very important role to children. Nevertheless, it seems to me that if we had been asked the question "What role does the gospel give to children?", many of us would without doubt have replied "a very unimportant role".

3 - Real power belongs to a child without any power; the Christ child

The gospel of Luke tells us the story of Christmas, the stable, the shepherds, the wise men; this particular scene was probably invented for teaching purposes, but it chimes so well with the evangelistic message that it has always seemed essential to Christians - and also to me. Let us study it; it has a lot to tell us about the child - and the adult.

On Christmas night, all the main players are in terrible trouble. Not to mention Mary and Joseph, brave without doubt, but burdened with having to bring into the world their child under the worst conditions; precarious situation, the smell of the stable, the dirt, total absence of any outside help. A birth is a magical moment, but in their case, it was more a cause for despair (Luke 2.6-7).

The shepherds also, didn't have an easy life. They didn't even go home at night to the shelter of the town. They were the under-class of that period. They slept on the floor, unable to really sleep, since "*at night they watched over their sheep*" (Luke 2.4). So that we are not under any illusion, their country was occupied. The occupying army was an awkward customer. The Jewish upper class were collaborators; hard times where the people waited desperately for an unlikely liberation.

As for the wise men, they also were probably not at peace with themselves. If they chose to renounce their creature comforts and even their security, it must have been because they were dissatisfied. If you are a king, you don't just throw yourself into a risky journey, with an uncertain objective, unless you are basically seriously tormented.

So, all these protagonists are in disarray, waiting for someone to rescue them. They reckon that this salvation will come from a powerful king.

But stop right there! What they are told, is that their powerful saviour ... is a child. What is more, this is a child from a modest background, even severely under-privileged, since Mary has been rejected by all of society.

Is Jesus a poor child? No, he is worse than poor, a miserably poor baby without linen, water or shelter, freezing cold in a thoroughly unpleasant place where animals live. Statistically, his chances of survival are poor. In truth, this child is the complete opposite of the providential leader they are in need of; they need a strong leader, a charismatic prophet, someone with the wisdom of a Nobel Prize winner.

And yet, this particular child is potentially the solution to all their problems. Why? Precisely because, like all children, he has no power. This is the paradoxical message which can only be brought by a child. *Ladies and gentlemen, if you really want to change things, having power will be of absolutely no use to you.*

This message is so illogical, that in truth, very few people have believed it or put it into practice, starting 2000 years ago and right up to the present day. As Nietzsche said "Christianity was a good idea. What a shame no-one has tried it ..."

When the gospel asserts thus the immense power of this Jesus-child, does it mean that the same is true of any child?

It seems to me that the answer is yes; you only need to see the way the gospel keeps affirming the prime importance of little ones, lepers, the lame, the prostitutes, in other words all the least privileged. The message is repeated in almost every chapter. As for the prime importance of children in particular, the gospel affirms this less often, but just as clearly.

4 - Are children big or little?

In chapter 7, verse 8, Jesus declares the important role of John the Baptist: "*amongst the children born of a woman, there is none more important*". But almost immediately, he adds mischievously (Luke 7.29): "*Nonetheless ... the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than him*"! Faced by such an unlikely proposition, you can imagine the disciples being stunned and mystified. They don't believe a word of it.

You will have probably noticed that, in the gospel, Jesus is repeatedly saddened when his disciples don't understand his teaching. I suppose that, to some extent, lets us off the hook when we don't understand.

Whatever, Jesus has the idea one day of using a passing child to demonstrate to the disciples what dunces they are (it's in Luke 9.46).

"An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest." The disciples have running through them a ridiculous vanity, very similar to ours or at any rate to mine! Jesus could have berated them, but yet again, he preferred to be mischievous rather than moralising: he has the idea of disconcerting them by telling

them a story in only the way he could: "*Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and made him stand beside him. Then he said to them: "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me."*

This was his way of saying "*you all agree, I'm sure, that in our group, I am number 1. But you were arguing over who should be number 2. Well, let me tell you, it is none of you! It is this child, for he is my equal."* And to further ram home the point, Jesus adds "*For he who is least among you all - he is the greatest.*" (Luke 9.48).

5 - We don't listen to what children can teach us.

(a) The gospel of Luke (7.31) affirms something surprising: It is children, more precisely ordinary "kids" who are capable of showing us the way. The real problem is that we, the adults, are deaf to what they have to say to us in warning:

To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? They are like children sitting in the market-place and calling out to each other: "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not cry."

Jesus is a keen observer of family life; he has noticed, for example, that parents make their excuses when their children ask them to play or sing with them. In this situation, we, the parents, take our time, we prefer to continue reading our newspaper. Jesus finds this deplorable, while making us understand; "Children have things they can make clear to you, but when they come to pull you by the sleeve, you reply 'Please, leave me alone, you are disturbing me.' "

(b) How can it be that children know more than adults?

Because it is not a question of knowing, but of looking. A child looks at things in a different way, probably more like an artist or a poet. A child looks curiously, without prejudice, and he or she is very willing to take in new information.

Jesus says this again in another context (Luke 18.15), just as the disciples are making an error, which they keep on making; they keep thinking they should send away various undesirables who, they think, are bothering the Master. That day, the people bothering them were children;

When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth; anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

The true meaning of the passage is not self-evident.

Firstly, what does it mean "*receive the kingdom of God*"? Maybe it means to change one's life in a good sense. In that case, the text means that Jesus has more faith in the capacity of a child to find faith than in that of an adult, precisely because of that ability to see things with fresh eyes, without prejudice, that all children bring to their observation of their surroundings. Surely, that is what every parent hopes as they look at their child and thinks, "You are fantastic, and you will go further than I ever did."

For our way of looking as adults do is lucid and therefore disillusioned, whereas that of the children is clear and therefore open.

That is why it is catastrophic when an adult presents an incorrect view of life to a child, as they show the wrong path to follow:

In chapter 17, verse 1:

Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied round his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves."

Put like that, this metaphor is pretty funny. It's a piece of theatre, even a bit farcical. As a good story-teller, Jesus knows how to use exaggeration for comic effect: in order to drown, you really only need a stone weighing a few kilos round your neck. By inserting into the story that improbable millstone weighing maybe several hundredweight, the preacher is using a classic comedian's ploy: when you want to make a serious point, making a joke about it is a good technique. That is why Jesus exaggerates. One could imagine him illustrating his words with gestures to describe the diameter of the millstone, just as fishermen hold their hands wide apart, struggling not to laugh, as they describe with apparent gravity, the size of the fish they have just caught.

And the substance of the message? Jesus warns us: if we don't behave well in front of the children, that bad example matters a lot. In other words, being in the presence of children gives us an opportunity; it obliges us to be better than we would be if they were not there.

Isn't that the experience of those of us, parents or not, who have looked after children? Is it not so, that our children exact the best from us? That positive experience corresponds exactly to what Jesus is talking about in the form of a warning.

Amongst those who followed Jesus from village to town during three years, were there any children?

It's very possible, since there were women and since Jesus didn't ask his disciples to remain celibate.

If there were children, why doesn't the gospel mention them? It is without doubt, because the disciples, as we have seen, regarded them as a nuisance. Also because at that time the only people who counted for anything were men, not women (whom the gospel mentions rarely), and not children. Nonetheless, Jesus said very clearly that he didn't hold with that view. In two centuries, we have ended up following in his footsteps when it comes to the importance of women. But when it comes to the importance of children, we continue to lag behind the gospel. Little children, be patient: maybe we need another two centuries.

6 - Children illuminate matters for adults by removing their prejudices.

Let's have a look at that surreal episode where Jesus, "*when he was twelve years old*", escaped the care of his parents. He pushed his boundaries. He wandered off in an unknown town and went to talk with strangers, the teachers of the law (Luke 2.46). Basically, this was a teenager opening his wings, taking risks. Mary and Joseph were clearly panic-struck. They would have been parents just like you or me, who would have forbidden their child from approaching strangers. This passage tells us it is necessary to put oneself in danger in order to grow, and that parents are wrong to always wrap their child in cotton wool.

But the gospel also tells us yet again, it seems to me, that our children, however inexperienced, have the resources to teach us about life: the doctors of the law listened carefully to Jesus.

Why is this so? It is because children have questions while we have the answers. To have all the answers is the surest way to extinguish all thought about a subject.

If we seek to recapture our memories as parents, I am sure that we will all be able to remember those moments where our children rocked our certainties, demolished our prejudices, thanks to their new 'take' on things. Similarly, can't we remember those occasions when we as children caused our parents to evolve?

I am grateful to the Équipe for giving me the excuse to dig deep in the gospel. It is an exploration which has thrown light on difficulties in my life. And I thank you for listening to the comments of an unbeliever who doesn't need Jesus to be God to taste the salt of his Word, particularly when he talks about children.

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