

A Child Christology

Does it make sense to speak of a christology of childhood? After all, christology studies Jesus Christ. However, just as we can analyze the titles for Jesus in coming to christological understanding, so can we analyze how Jesus saw children and what he thought of them. If he ever closely identified a child with himself, then we can speak of the christology of childhood. As we shall see below, Jesus did indeed equate young children *per se* with himself. Also, Jesus' own historicity as child may not only speak to why Jesus equates himself with children but allows us to extrapolate how we see Jesus as child to all children. We can do so because Jesus has done so.

Since, in part, we recall Jesus' death and resurrection at Sunday liturgies, we ought to look at how Jesus saw children within his redemptive mission on earth. We can see the picture that Jesus draws in his own words in the synoptic and Johannine gospels, in gospel descriptions, in apostolic reflection found in Pauline and other texts in Christian scripture. The sum of these texts can help us draw the details of a christological picture of child.

But first, we can ask whether those texts appear in the lectionary? The texts that do appear in the lectionary will have greater impact on the assembly than those that do not. It is not because of the importance of the texts themselves but because the assembly hears lectionary texts.

Consequently, we can draw a picture of what the assembly probably hears, over three years, about the christology of children.

Strictly speaking, a child christology relies on Jesus identifying himself with being a child in any way, either with some kind of title or attribute for his mission on earth. Any title will be a new title.⁵ Certain lectionary texts are provocative. Jesus holds a child in his arms and identifies himself with

⁵ Cullmann has these titles: prophet, suffering servant of God, high priest, messiah, son of man, lord, saviour, word, son of God, God; Cullmann, Oscar, *The Christology of the New Testament*, New Testament Library, SCM Press, London, 1959, 1963; there are up to 30 identified titles for Christ, including, in 1st Clement 16, the use of "*teknon*" or child.

her by saying all who welcome the child welcome not only him (Jesus), but the one who sent him (the Father). The titles, Son of Man and Son of God, are provocative as well. While gender specific, those titles may imply that Jesus is Child of God.⁶

A christology of childhood can also depend on Jesus holding up any aspect of childhood as significant for entry into the kingdom and, therefore, as somehow Christ-like. Jesus certainly does hold up the idea of child as key to entry to the kingdom.

Will it be as hard for an adult to enter the kingdom of heaven as a rich man? That appears to be what Jesus is saying.⁷ It's not impossible for either to get in, just hard. Why?

For the rich, there is a tendency to accumulate and hold on to stuff. It's fairly clear that holding on to stuff runs afoul of giving. The idea of the rich man and "heaven-trouble" is an easy one to grasp, even for a rich man.

However, the idea that merely being an adult can work against one is, on the surface, not quite so easy to grasp. Yet Jesus calls us to give all our stuff away and to be like little children to enter the kingdom.

We may be called to "be like children" in order to have effective liturgy too. Good adult liturgy may very well be the best of children's liturgy. We may be called to really and liturgically 'be like little children to enter the kingdom.'

TWO PERTINENT VIEWS OF CHILDREN IN CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE

Fortunately, Christian scripture gives some attention to the word and subject of children. The lectionary renders a few Greek words with "child." The noun "child," as *nepios* (νῆπιος⁸), occurs less than a dozen times. As *teknon*

⁶ 1st Clement, quoting Is. 53: 1ff, says of Jesus "He is, as it were, a child."

⁷ Mk. 10: 13-16 (Lectionary 140)

⁸ νῆπιος tends to imply attributes of a young child like innocence, weakness or dependency, Kittel, Gerhard, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1973, (IV, p. 914 (TDNT)); while τέκνον tends to be a generic, genealogical or possessive use of child (as chattel), Anon., *The Analytical Greek Lexicon*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1972, p. 404.