

Sermon on Wednesday 16 December 2020

by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

Reading: Mark 7. 24-30

Here we are in the middle of Advent, in the countdown to Christmas. And who is getting the most excited? Children, of course. Some very young children may not have a memory of Christmas in the past, but they pick up on the excitement. If any of you have been down to St Andrew's over the last few days and seen the Nativity figures that Rosemary has been placing among the gravestones (Mary and Joseph and a donkey, the shepherds and some rather soggy sheep and, most recently, some stately kings...) and if you've seen any children enter the churchyard, you will have seen how fascinated and enchanted they are by these scenes.

Children are special. Children are innocent, without prejudice; they live for the moment. Jesus valued children. He cured the daughter of the Syrophenician woman with only a moment's hesitation. In Luke, we hear how he cured the daughter of Jairus. And later in Luke we hear Jesus say, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs".

Who knows the name Eglantyne Jebb?

She was British. She was born in Shropshire in 1876 and tomorrow is the date in the liturgical calendar of the Church of England when we remember her. Why? Because she founded the Save the Children Fund.

As many of you know, I have worked for a number of children's charities, and she is revered as a determined originator. Her nickname was 'white heat' because of her passion for justice. She

was one of those outspoken, Victorian humanitarians with a strong social conscience.

She was raised in a wealthy family and brought up with privileges but she kicked against the conventions of the day and, in another era, would probably have been a politician. But women didn't even have the right to vote in those days, let alone enter Parliament. So she trained to be a teacher. During her twenties, Eglantyne had a vision of Jesus which acted as the formative experience of her life, after which she would always, when faced with a challenge, ask: "What would Christ do?"

Towards the end of the First World War, she became aware of the situation facing children in Germany and Austria-Hungary. These countries were facing defeat in the war and were being blockaded by the allies and the people were starving. As always, it is the children who suffer most in these situations because they are vulnerable, weak and have little resilience.

Eglantyne campaigned for the British government to end the blockade and to help the children of these enemy countries.

On 15 April 1919, the Save the Children Fund was founded and, perhaps surprisingly, at its official launch at the Royal Albert Hall the following month, large sums of money were raised and donated.

As peace returned to Europe, Eglantyne focused her internationally growing movement on a declaration of rights for children. In 1925, the first International Child Welfare congress was held in Geneva, and the declaration was widely discussed and supported by organisations and governments. An extended version would be adopted by the United Nations in 1959, and it was one of the main inspirations behind the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Very important legislation.

Unfortunately, Eglantyne suffered poor health and she died in a nursing home in Geneva in 1928 aged just 52. But she had made her mark. She had helped drag Western society from having no respect for children (just think of the way children suffer in Dickens novels) to acknowledging, as Christ did, that children are important.

Sometimes God chooses the most unexpected people to see his will done on earth; sometimes he uses more obvious leaders. It just depends what the task is. Moses grew up in the luxury of Pharaoh's palace and wasn't expecting to lead the Children of Israel out of Egypt, but he did. The gentile Syrophenician woman wouldn't have expected to find her daughter's cure with the Jewish Messiah, but it was the will of God.

Eglantyne Jepp wasn't expecting to be called to save millions of children from starvation, but she answered the call to make a difference. Thank you, Lord, for the people who follow your call. We will remember Eglantyne Jepp tomorrow with thanks and humility. Amen



<https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/about-us/our-history>

Mark 7. 24-30

The Syrophenician Woman's Faith

...He set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, and a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.

Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.