

main course

encounters in Mark's Gospel – nine *Jesus and the children – Mk 10.13-16*

This is one of a number of '**encounters in Mark's Gospel**' each of which enables a small-group conversation around a particular story in Mark's Gospel. These conversations aim to help you, and everyone else in your group, to:

- build up your **confidence** in actively exploring bits of the Bible
- **make connections** between the biblical story and your own life story
- find fresh **vision** for the business of being human today

all from watching and talking freely with each other about encounters between Jesus and those he meets – as we find them recorded in Mark's Gospel.

INTRODUCTION

This ninth **encounter in Mark's Gospel** can all too easily remind some of us of sentimental pictures hung in church halls and Sunday School classrooms. It really needs rescuing as it is a daring encounter laden with political meaning. Watch as the sentiment and the mustiness fall away. See if your group can re-encounter this encounter.

STRUCTURE

Each of your **encounters in Mark's Gospel** will follow the same basic structure:

1. Assembling and beginning
2. Sharing the story of the encounter
3. Our initial reactions - sharing our own first responses
4. Extra Insights 1 – learning from Mark's big story
5. Extra Insights 2 – learning about Jesus' world
6. Exploring the Encounter Triangle
 - What do we think was learned from encountering Jesus?
 - What do we think Jesus learned from the encounter?
 - What have we learned from watching the encounter?
7. Deciding how that helps us to live now
8. (optional) Rounding it off with a song

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1. ASSEMBLING and BEGINNING

The group needs to gather, settle in and prepare for a shared conversation. This may or may not include prayer or worship or some catering option, depending on your local circumstances and context.

2. SHARING THE STORY

The conversation is started by hearing or sharing the story that will form its focus – the story told in **Mark 10.13-16**. This might be done in one of the following ways:

- Someone reads **Mark 10.13-16** straight from their Bible
- The group re-constructs the story of **Mark 10.13-16** from various rememberings
- The story of **Mark 10.13-16** is told by someone who has prepared it for telling
- A locally-devised combination of some of the above

Mark 10.13-16 is one of those stories that is present in Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel as well as in Mark, so if your group uses a remembering and re-telling approach you are going to have to decide how closely you all want to keep to Mark's particular telling.

3. OUR INITIAL REACTIONS

The group should then consider the question:

- “What is this story about?”

This can be done with a brief time of discussion in twos and threes followed by reporting to the whole group, or done as a whole group conversation – as group size and local practice allow. Let's be clear, there's no 'right' answer to this question – it's simply an assembling of ways in which hearing the story has struck group members and their memories of how they have learned its 'meaning' from past encounters and received teaching.

4. EXTRA INSIGHTS part one – learning from Mark's big story

Share the information about how Mark has used this story and where he's placed it in his big story that's given in the EXTRA INSIGHTS on **page 6** at the end of these notes

5. EXTRA INSIGHTS part two – learning about Jesus' world

Share the information about the social, political and religious world in which Jesus lived that's given in the EXTRA INSIGHTS on **page 7** at the end of these notes

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6. EXPLORING THE ENCOUNTER TRIANGLE

The group takes time to explore the story (in the light of their initial ideas and the Extra Insights that they've shared), standing, in turn, at each corner of the triangle:

Standing and looking at the story from the perspective of the children, consider:

- **What do we think the children learned from this encounter with Jesus?**
 - *teasing this out ... What sort of welcome might children have expected from a male religious leader? What did Jesus' attitude and actions say to them? What difference might that make to how they saw themselves, others & God?*

Standing and looking at the story from Jesus' perspective, consider:

- **What do we think Jesus learned from this encounter with the children?**
 - *teasing this out ... What made Jesus indignant? What do you think Jesus saw in children that suited them for the Kingdom of God? What was Jesus learning about his disciples, about children, about himself?*

Standing where we stand, watching the whole encounter, consider:

- **What have we learned from watching these proceedings?**
 - *teasing this out ... What previous understandings of this story did we bring? What have we found in the story this time? What about this story connects with our own stories? What do we take away from watching this encounter together?*

7. HOW DOES THAT HELP US TO LIVE NOW?

Now your group needs to bring it all home. Working as a group, consider two questions:

- **In what ways does this story speak to us today?**

Be imaginative. Be playful. Be daring. Be incredibly serious. Try ideas. Disagree. Come to a consensus. Work with the story like you're squeezing oranges. What good ideas to help us with living now can the group find from what you have watched?

- **What are we going to do differently now?**

Be practical. Be realistic. But be prepared to face the risks and challenges the story raises. Honestly address what the story seems to be saying to you and your situation as individuals, but also as a group, in your church and in your local community.

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8. ROUNDING IT OFF WITH A SONG *(optional)*

JESUS AND THE CHILDREN *based on Mark 10.13-16*

tune: 'When the Spirit of the Lord is within my heart...'

When disciples tried to stop children reaching Him,
Jesus welcomed them with love!

When disciples tried to turn kids away unblessed,
Jesus welcomed them with love!

With two open arms and two laughing eyes,
Jesus welcomed them with love!

With two list'ning ears and one caring heart,
Jesus welcomed them with love!

So whoever others treat as a waste of time,
Jesus welcomes them with love!
yes, whoever's left ignored with their cries unheard,
Jesus welcomes them with love!

Never think you're lost, never feel alone,
Jesus welcomes you with love!
Never hate yourself, don't assume you've failed,
Jesus welcomes you with love!

If the love of Jesus lives deep within our hearts
we must welcome others too.
If we'd follow step by step where our Saviour led
we must do what He would do -
find new ways to share, liberate our care,
make outsiders welcome too;
draw the fringes in, help the losers win,
'til Christ lives through me and you!.

John M. Campbell

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EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

This is one of a number of **encounters in Mark's Gospel** that are being offered through the Vision4Life website. Between them these conversation materials explore a whole range of different encounters that Jesus has in the course of the Gospel story. If your group found this one helpful they may wish to try some of the others.

*Full acknowledgement for the ideas and information that have helped us to construct these materials is given in the **Introduction** to the 'encounters in Mark's Gospel' programme on the Vision4Life website:*

www.vision4life.org.uk

see the following two pages for the "Extra Insights" materials for this conversation...

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EXTRA INSIGHTS

part one – learning from Mark's big story

What can we learn from the stories Mark places both before and after our story and from the way our story works in the whole- Gospel storyline?:

The bit before our bit (Mk 10.1-12)

- **Marriage and divorce** – Jesus talks of marriage and divorce, but makes no mention of children. How does that connect with our story? Try this. It may be that Jesus' emphasis on the seriousness of the marriage bond is a re-focussing of the whole idea of family. Marriage is not to be seen as just an easily-altered convenience for the husband or father. Marriage creates a covenanted community of mutual care that is intended to benefit all its members equally. Certainly, our story puts Jesus' valuing of children as people up there right next to this bit about marriage and divorce. The two stories can powerfully interact even if Mark offers no explicit connection.

The bit after our bit (Mk 10.17-31)

- **Wealth, poverty and heaven** – The 'surprise' sprung in the next story doesn't work for most of us, because we know the story already. But look carefully. As the story unfolds, it seems to be all about right living before God; it's only in the very last words of the telling that we hear that the man talking to Jesus is **rich** – and that one fact suddenly becomes the true focus of the story. The significance of wealth and poverty becomes even clearer in the story after that. For, when Jesus talks about how hard it is for rich people to enter heaven (remember a needle's eye must have been about the smallest hole most of his audience could push anything through and a camel was probably the largest animal they regularly encountered), even his disciples are horrified. Why? Because they seem to assume, along with everyone else, that riches are supposed to be a sign of God's blessing (even if the wealthy landlords who operate in Galilee are endlessly engaged in sharp practices). So, if the obviously-blessed are going to find it this hard to enter heaven, where does that leave the likes of Peter, or village children? Jesus is standing yet another obvious truth on its head.

Our story in the flow of Mark's whole-Gospel story

- **On the road** – the whole of Mark Chapter 10 takes place on the road to Jerusalem for Jesus' final showdown with the powers that be. We are invited to walk that road along with a determined Jesus and a slow-footed, somewhat reluctant group of followers increasingly riddled with uncertainties and misgivings. Even as they travel, Jesus persists in interacting with the people they meet in ways that are unconventional, even shocking. And from each encounter he draws out bigger, deeper lessons. This all-too-familiar story about Jesus, his bossy disciples and these bemused children with anxious parents fits right in the middle of this. Yet again, Jesus is reconstructing reality by challenging big basic chunks of what-everyone-knows-is-true.

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EXTRA INSIGHTS

part two – learning about Jesus' world

Why seek a blessing?

In any small Galilean town in the time of Jesus it would be unusual for a whole week to pass without the death and burial of some young child. Children were the weakest and most vulnerable members of the community. The risk of unexplained and fatal fevers was always present. Malina and Rohrbaughⁱ suggest that around 60% of all 1st Century Galilean children who survived through the first few weeks of life still died before reaching the age of 16. Yet your only hope of support if you yourself survived into old age was practical help from your surviving children. Add to all that the likely blend of parental love and an endless fear of losing a child and, clearly, there were strong reasons for seeking a blessing for your children.

Who's in and who's out?

Yet according to 'the way things were', mere children would normally be kept to the end of any queue for access to a renowned teacher like Jesus – if they were allowed to join the queue at all. Those closest to Jesus would know this. Here, surely, was another chance for them to demonstrate their own closeness and importance by organising and controlling Jesus-access for everyone else; it was their duty as loyal lieutenants to make clear that children could not be brought to Jesus. Yet, they probably said nothing when that earnest, well-dressed man approached Jesus to discuss holiness in the next story (Mark 10.17-22)

Children, especially boys, may have been counted as a blessing, but they were not expected to intrude uninvited into the adult (male) world and had little or no social status, especially out beyond their own family. To receive and bless, to give honour to these near-nobodies who were learning to survive in their own volatile, half-hidden, juvenile underclass with its own bullies and violence, to proclaim that the Kingdom of God belongs to **them** (not to the wealthiest, most learned, most respected or most overtly religious men in society) is a shocking disruption of what everyone knows is right.

Yet something about Jesus and his message must have made it seem worth trying to seek his blessing. In the end, his personal openness and welcome leave a powerful lingering image of what Jesus was about – even if some of us have to struggle to rescue it from the sorts of saccharine pictures of Jesus and the sweet little children that they used to hang up in Sunday Schools or include as colour illustrations in children's Bibles.

ⁱ Malina, Bruce J. & Rohrbaugh, Richard L. (2003) *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, p.336.