A Topsy-Turvy Kingdom

What does the Kingdom of God mean for children facing mounting problems in their lives?
As Christians, we are called to protect all vulnerable people, especially the young. At The Children’s Society we believe that every young person deserves a good childhood. We listen to young people, seeking to understand their well-being. We support young people who aren’t safe, aren’t loved and can’t cope. We share in the mission of the Church, following the example of Jesus in Scripture, where he is concerned with the welfare of those who are amongst the most vulnerable.

You might like to use the following reflection on Matthew 5 for your own personal study or devotions. You might like to use it corporately, in church, or as the basis of a sermon. There is no right or wrong way. If you lead a congregation or group, do take a look at the final section of this resource, which includes notes on how you can take action, or incorporate these ideas in a service.

As you read about The Children’s Society’s research, you are invited to think through how you could respond. Do take the time to consider the impact you can have, both with and through your church community. By joining with others, we are able to make a difference in our communities and beyond.
The Children’s Society has been publishing groundbreaking research into children’s well-being since 2006. The Good Childhood Report 2017 provides fresh insight into children’s well-being, in children and young people’s own words. And young people are telling us that they are not happy in every area of their lives.

In the preparation of Good Childhood Reports we listen to children’s collective voices, gathered through large-scale surveys that ask young people how they feel about their lives. We listen to the voices of individuals, conducting in-depth interviews that allow them to present their distinctive views and experiences to us. There is great value in listening both ways, hearing the issues young people face and, more than that, understanding them. What we have learned indicates that there is a long way to go before we see all young people flourishing and supported by families, schools and community groups.

**Findings from the 2017 Good Childhood Report**

This year’s Good Childhood Report focuses on the mounting problems that affect children, specifically the fears and worries which affect children’s mental health and well-being. Fear of crime, living in a family struggling to pay the bills, and not having enough emotional support at home are just some of the serious problems that mean teenagers are more likely to be unhappy. The statistics are worrying: 1 in 3 teenage girls are afraid of being followed by a stranger, and 1 in 4 boys are worried they’ll be assaulted.

The Children’s Society has found that teenagers with more than seven serious problems in their life are 10 times more likely to feel unhappy than those with none. Many of these teenagers feel alone, with no one to trust, and these mounting problems can be overwhelming. Emotional support is essential for young people who don’t feel safe or loved and can’t cope.
Looking at the teachings of Jesus, we can begin to understand how we, as church communities, might begin to respond to the needs of vulnerable young people. Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.’ (Matthew 11.25-26). It is not the wise or intelligent that Jesus says will receive revelation from God, rather the wisdom of God is revealed to ‘infants’, by God’s grace.

Young people ask questions. They have the capacity to trust deeply. Children would have been ignored in ancient society; ‘out of sight out of mind’ was a phrase coined much later but there is no doubt that the children of Jesus’ time would have been frequently ignored, mistreated or neglected. And yet Jesus welcomes them. He draws alongside those who are weakest, those who feel they are hopeless and at the end of themselves. Rather than ignoring their needs, he listens, speaking of the worth of every individual. It is evident that Jesus is standing alongside those young people who aren’t safe, aren’t loved and can’t cope.
The welcome of Jesus is a significant indicator that the Kingdom of God, the rule and reign of an almighty God of grace, is out of step with society. The Kingdom of God is the place where heaven and earth meet. It is where the things of God collide with the brokenness of humanity. It’s God’s rule and reign, and it certainly isn’t the kind of rule we might expect.

In the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, we see something of the way God’s Kingdom totally contradicts our expectations. In Matthew 5 we read that God blesses the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who seek righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted. Here we begin to sense something of the backward nature of God’s Kingdom. It is people who are the most vulnerable that God seeks to bless; the rich, the knowledgeable and comfortable are not front-runners in the Kingdom of God.

The Greek word used here is makarios, meaning ‘blessed’ or ‘happy’. It is a happiness given by God. Those usually referred to as blessed within Greek and Roman culture would have been the elite: those with wealth, status, power. But Matthew, in writing down the teachings of Jesus, uses this word very differently. Matthew uses the word to describe those who would have been ranked lowest in society at that time as happy or blessed.

Growing up I was an avid reader of the Mr Men and Little Miss series. My favourite of this series was, and still is, the story of Mr Topsy-Turvy. I found it hilarious that Mr Topsy-Turvy does the exact opposite of what all the other characters do. He does things like putting his socks on his hands rather than his feet, and saying ‘afternoon good’ instead of ‘good afternoon’; Mr Topsy-Turvy’s world is completely back to front. Reading the story again as an adult, I am inclined to ask questions about why Mr Topsy-Turvy was seen to be ‘wrong’. But as a child I was simply amused by Mr Topsy-Turvy’s actions being the wrong way around – the exact opposite of what the reader expects.

God often does the exact opposite of what we expect. Throughout the narrative of the Gospels, Jesus tells the religious teachers that they are completely wrong about their understanding of God’s action in the world. God does not prefer those who keep all religious commandments, nor those who have great wealth. In fact, Jesus tells us that it is very challenging for the rich to go to heaven.
The Kingdom of God belongs to those vulnerable young people who aren’t safe, aren’t loved and can’t cope. But this is not the way that things should be, or always will be. So how do we respond?

We listen. We need to listen to the voices of young people experiencing the daily reality of poverty, and let our listening, alongside our theology, shape our response. If disadvantaged children are at the forefront of the Kingdom of God, it is imperative that we listen to them.

Listening is not a passive activity. It requires attention, perseverance, and conscious effort. To ignore young people is to ignore those God places right at the heart of the Kingdom. In a recent talk at the New Wine festival the Bishop of Burnley, Philip North, spoke of how the Church is neglecting those who are living in poverty. He suggested that things need to change; action must be taken ‘to turn the church upside down’ and to ‘become a church of and for the poor that the world might believe’.

We might look silly putting our socks on our hands, but we are called to live in an upside down world whilst simultaneously being present in ordered society. We are called to treat vulnerable people with dignity and respect, and to speak out not just on their behalf but by drawing alongside them. The Church is called to shout about justice, to champion those who have escalating problems, to ‘open our ears to the cry of the poor’.

Taking action

The Children’s Society is taking action to make sure that every child has the best possible childhood. Funding for early help services alone is expected to be cut by 70% between 2010 and 2020, leaving a £2 billion gap that will have a devastating impact on young people. Teenagers need urgent help, but the services there to support them are being cut. Our recommendations are:

1. The Government must fill the gap in funding for children’s services so that local support is available for young people who need it most.

2. Local councils must make sure that all local agencies – police, schools and others – work together to make the well-being of children who are experiencing multiple disadvantage a top priority.

We are asking the Government for more local funding to help young people before they hit crisis point. We believe that, by working together with churches, we have an incredible potential to create change. Will you join us?

You can add your voice to our campaign by visiting www.childrenssociety.org.uk/good-childhood-act or clicking on this link.

If you are reading a printed copy of this resource, we have included copies of our petition to share with your congregation,2 so that together we can help young people get the support they need.

We would love to help and support you as you make a difference on behalf of vulnerable young people. To get in touch, just email church@childrenssociety.org.uk and we

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2 If you are in need of more petitions, please email: church@childrenssociety.org.uk
Funding cuts are having a devastating impact on young people. Please help us be there for them by donating today.

You can text **CHILD to 83010** to donate £5 to The Children’s Society today.

By texting you are consenting to further contact by telephone and SMS. Text **NOPHONE to 70099** if you’d prefer us not to contact you in these ways.

We are so grateful for your support.
You are invited to join The Children’s Society in prayer for those young people who are experiencing mounting problems:

God of compassion,
Who loves and cares for young people who aren’t safe, aren’t loved and can’t cope. 
Inspire us to see young people with your eyes, to listen to their problems and to speak out on their behalf when they are voiceless.
May we be communities which seek to build your Kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.
We make this prayer in the name of Jesus who blessed the weak and cherished the vulnerable.

Amen.
Blessed are those who scrape together their last pennies for a child’s packed lunch: 

*for God sees them and knows them.*

Blessed are those who feel trapped by ever growing problems, unable to escape mounting debt no matter how hard they try: 

*for God sees them and knows them.*

Blessed are those who are unhappy with their lives and not sure who to turn to for help or support: 

*for God sees them and knows them.*

Blessed are those who worry about their children at school, fearing that they do not fit in with everyone else: 

*for God sees them and knows them.*

Blessed are those who hide, shut behind closed doors or curled in corners, too afraid to step out: 

*for God sees them and knows them.*

Blessed are those who are at the end of themselves, shaken and facing what feel like raging storms ahead: 

*for God sees them and knows them.*

Blessed are those who seek justice for the weak, show love to the vulnerable and remain present to the abandoned: 

*for God sees them and knows them.*
You might like to use these reflections as a sermon/talk outline.

- Why not use the reflection on Matthew 5 as a starting point for a church-wide campaign? This might be something you could incorporate into a Sunday sermon or service, or you might like to host a separate event. Please do get in touch if you would like further resources for this.
- There are discussion questions on this page if you would like to take the ideas in this resource further.

For an all-age service, you might like to adapt your talk along the following lines:

- Read or re-tell the story of Mr Topsy-Turvy to your congregation. You might like to invite young people to act out or read parts of the story, for example acting out putting socks on their hands.
- Ask the question: ‘why do you think people are surprised by Mr Topsy-Turvy’s actions?’ Ask the congregation to feed back. Do invite young people to share what they think.
- Introduce the idea that the Kingdom of God is surprising. We are living in an upside-down world, and God prioritises those who aren’t safe, aren’t loved and can’t cope.
- God’s Kingdom is for everyone, and we are to welcome those who are struggling around us.

You can find out more about our research and read the full version of The Good Childhood Report 2017 online at childrenssociety.org.uk/goodchildhood

Discussion questions

1. What does it mean to have a ‘good’ childhood? Discuss whether you think that a good childhood might look the same for everyone.

2. Think about the young people in your church community. Are you aware of the issues they might be experiencing in your local area? How might you seek to understand the things they face?

3. The Kingdom of God welcomes those who are aren’t safe, aren’t loved and can’t cope. How does the ethos of your church reflect these Kingdom values?
Too many children and young people in this country don’t feel safe, loved or able to cope. Together we can change their lives.

The Children’s Society is a national charity that runs local services and campaigns to change the law to help this country’s most vulnerable young people.

Our supporters around the country fund our services and join our campaigns to show children they are on their side.

Find out more at childrenssociety.org.uk