

## **'A LETTER TO ST MARK'S CHURCH FROM HER PASTOR'**

**DECEMBER 15, 2019**

Dear brothers and sisters,

As I draw a breath at the end of another year at St Mark's and look back over the past twelve months, there are many things that I am encouraged by. But perhaps one of the most encouraging things is the growth in our children and youth ministries. I realise that most of you don't get to actually see these ministries in operation, so it'd be possible not to really know what they look like or how they're going. So let me tell you.

Kids Church and Minis on Sunday mornings have benefitted enormously from Steph's appointment as our Pastor for Children. She has been in that role for three years now. She has brought to bear a stable and focused leadership which really has borne fruit. Around her, Steph has gathered a team of very passionate and capable volunteers who are serving week by week to pastor and teach children from Preschool age up to the end of Year 6. On average there are about 25 children in these programs on a Sunday morning each week.

Youth Ministry at St Mark's consists of a once a month Youth Bible Study on a Sunday morning and our Friday night Youth Group called ALIVE which operates during school terms throughout the year. Sometimes Pat and Issy are also meeting up with young people one on one for Christian encouragement and pastoral care. As you may know, Pat has been leading this ministry for a few years now. But having him available to devote two days a week to it this year has really strengthened the work. You might recall that prior to 2012 there hadn't been an organised youth ministry at St Mark's for several years. But in 2012 we began a Friday night Youth Group with just a few teenagers. Now, eight years later, an average Friday night has about 20 young people attending and there are probably 25 people in the database who'd be considered regulars. What's more, they're an exciting mix of church members and non-church members.

Given Northbridge has so many young families in it, I've said ever since I became Rector at St Mark's that providing quality ministry to children and young people needs to be a high priority. We've worked hard on this together and God has been answering our prayers. 2019 is the first year we have had a paid two-day a week staff member focusing on both children's ministry and youth ministry. And we couldn't have asked God for better people for these roles than Steph and Pat. But they're not just running everything themselves. They're growing teams- teams of church members who share in a commitment to be pastors and teachers for our children and young people.

And, by God's grace, both these ministries are growing. Average attendance is increasing across the board. In part that's because God is drawing more people in to

our church. In part it's also because, especially with Youth Group, God is bringing teenagers to know and trust Jesus for the first time. It's so wonderful to see what God is doing. And that, of course, is the main thing you need to know about these ministries. God is at work in the lives of these children and young people. It's great that the ministries are growing in size. But far more thrilling is the fact that children and young people are expressing faith in Jesus for themselves, they're working out what it means to be a Christian, and they're learning to love God's word and to pray. We're seeing them maturing before our very eyes. I trust it's not hard to understand why I find so much encouragement in this. I hope you do too.

But of course, this work of God has implications for us as a church- implications beyond our encouragement. Because this work of God also presses us to ask some searching questions- questions about how children and young people are integrated into the church family, questions about how we can all serve each other regardless of age, questions about how people across the generations relate to each other and encourage each other. In fact, these are important questions for any church to answer. But they are particularly salient for us at this point in our history. So, they are questions that our pastors and our overseers have been giving some serious attention to. And they're questions we want all St Mark's members to be giving attention to.

And that's why I chose the Bible readings for today's services that I did. Because they speak into this issue in very important ways.

In Matthew 18 we find Jesus calling a little child into the middle of a circle and teaching his disciples some important lessons. In the first place he tells them that there's something about the humility of children that all people need to emulate if they're going to be part of the kingdom. Adults of course have plenty to teach children as they grow up. But Jesus wants us to see that adults also have plenty to learn from children. And, in particular, he wants us to see that the instinctive dependence that children have on others is absolutely central to the attitude people need to have towards God. You don't enter the kingdom by telling God he's lucky to have you. You don't enter the kingdom by pointing to all your great gifts or all your good deeds. No- you enter the kingdom by acknowledging your profound need. You enter the kingdom by recognising your deep dependence on the king. And children model this kind of humble dependence to us all the time. That's Jesus' first point.

But Jesus' second point in Matthew 18 is that the way people treat children is a kind of litmus test for whether they've understood the values of God's kingdom. In verse 5 Jesus says: 'And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me'. To include and love children is to embrace Jesus himself. To care for them is to show that you've understood how precious to Jesus his little ones are. And that's why Jesus goes on in verses 6-10 to talk about the eternal dangers of sin, and the supreme wickedness of causing one of his little ones to fall into sin. By "little ones" here, Jesus is not just meaning children, but all his disciples. That's what he says in verse 6. But he uses this phrase precisely because all who believe in him are like

children before God, as he said back in verses 3-4. So Jesus reserves the sternest possible warning here for those who might lead his “little ones” into temptation. And it’s in the same vein that he talks in verse 12-14 about the opposite- the vital importance of caring for the sheep, and especially of seeking out the strays. Jesus couldn’t be clearer. Like all dependent children are vulnerable, so all his disciples are vulnerable- adults and children alike. So we who are part of his kingdom have a weighty responsibility to care for his vulnerable people, and to make sure we steer one another clear of spiritual danger.

And that’s why we find passages like Titus 2 in the New Testament as well. Because the apostle Paul is working on the assumption that the early Christian churches were places where young and old were all in together. And if you want a picture of the different generations fellowshiping together and encouraging each other, it’s hard to go past Titus 2.

In that chapter Paul addresses Titus who’s serving as Paul’s delegate in the church at Crete. And he wants to make sure that Titus has a teaching ministry to all the different groups in the church- older men, older women, younger women, younger men, and slaves. But when he teaches those different groups, he wants Titus to be thinking about how they will in turn teach and train others. For example, verse 2 says he wants the older men to be worthy of respect- presumably so others in the church can look up to them and imitate them. In verse 4 we see that Paul imagines the older women training the younger women, and then the younger women loving their husbands and children. In verse 7 Paul tells Titus to make sure that he himself is getting a good example for the younger men as well.

And at the heart of all of this cross-generational interaction is the gospel. In verse 1 Paul says that Titus’ role is to teach what’s appropriate to sound doctrine. And then from verse 11 to 14 he fleshes out what the heart of sound doctrine is. In fact, verses 11 to 14 spell out not only what Christ has done, but why he did it. Paul not only talks about the ‘grace’ of Christ’s ‘appearing’- the grace that leads to ‘salvation’. He also says, verse 12, that the grace of Christ is what ‘teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives’. In verse 14 he says that the whole reason Christ gave up his life was so we could be redeemed from wickedness and live in purity and goodness.

In the church we might all be different ages and at different stages, but we are united in this gospel and in this purpose. Every one of us, regardless of our differences, needs the grace of Jesus to save us. Every one of us needs the grace of Jesus to change us too- to purify and transform us to live the way God wants us to. So, every one of us needs each other to keep reminding us of the gospel, to keep modelling the Christian life, and to keep teaching one another how to live it. This is what it means for us to be part of a church family- whether you’re 5 years, 15 years old, or 85 years old.

So, let me say some things to the children and young people amongst us.

You are not just part of Kids Church or part of our Youth Group. You are actually part of our church. You are members of St Mark's in your own right. When our staff and overseers meet to pray for the members of our church, we don't just pray for your parents, but also for you. When we make a record of how many people were here on a given Sunday, we don't just count the grown-ups. We count you, because you count! We care about you and we will keep caring about you. We want to see you growing up knowing about the grace of Jesus, and living the way the grace of Jesus teaches us to live. We want to teach you, and correct you, and set a good example for you. And I think there really are some amazing older people in this church you can learn from.

But because you are already growing, and because so many of you already have a deep and wise understanding of the gospel, we know we also have a lot to learn from you. In fact, as Jesus says, children have things to teach adults just by being children! But we also know that there are things you see and know about God that adults are sometimes quick to forget. We know that there's a clarity and a boldness to your faith that sometimes puts us to shame. We know that there's a zeal and energy to your service of Christ that some of us older people need to rekindle. We thank God for you and we want to learn from you.

But one of the challenges that comes with all this is a need to branch out in who you talk to. So I want to encourage you today not just to spend time with your friends when you're at church, or at Youth Group, or at Home Group, or at Escape. I want to encourage you to talk to adults some of the time too. I'd love you to practise asking adults questions about their lives. I'd love you to learn how to ask adults what they're learning about God, how they became Christians, what they struggle with. And I'd love you to find ways to share what you're learning with adults too, and to tell them what you love about God, and how you're trying to live for Jesus. So I want to encourage you today to make an effort to talk to adults more, and to be thinking about how you can serve the adults in our church community, not just the others in your age group.

But, of course, I've also got some things I want to say to the adults.

As I've just said to our children and young people, so I say to you. Please be on the lookout for opportunities to serve the younger members of our church, and to take an interest in them. I really don't want us to fall into a model of church life where we effectively have different ministry departments- one for children, one for youth, and one for adults. I don't want your knowledge of children's ministry or youth ministry in our church simply to consist of the feedback you might get a couple of times a year in a Sunday service. I want you to be finding out how things are going much more regularly than that as you talk to our staff and leaders. And I want you to remember that teaching our children and young people is not just the job of their parents or their leaders. We all have a role to play.

I was reading some research recently into the formation of resilient young Christians. The research concluded that young people who are more likely to persevere and keep growing in their faith are generally committed to five key practices<sup>1</sup>. One of those practices was the nurturing of intergenerational Christian relationships. And young people who have intergenerational relationships are more likely to report feeling valued by older people, more likely to welcome criticism from their elders, and more likely to look to older people for advice<sup>2</sup>.

So here is a huge opportunity for us, and a huge challenge. We have the privilege of helping to shape the lives of those in the generations behind us. But we won't fulfill that responsibility if we presume their parents or their leaders have got that covered. Rather, what will really help our children and young people grow into resilient disciples of Jesus is the whole church family investing in their maturing. People often say that it takes a village to raise a child. Well, the Bible would say that it takes a whole church family to raise a robust young disciple of Christ.

I am deeply thankful to God for the other adults in our church who take an interest in my children. I need no convincing that their love for my kids, their prayers, their sincere interest, their godly example, and their words of encouragement are all making a significant difference to my children's maturing. What a huge blessing it is that my children are growing up in a Christian community where that's a thing- where they have not just a mum and a dad, but also leaders who pastor and teach them, and, beyond that, a range of other adults who minister the gospel of grace to them. And that blessing in our church is not just for my children but for everyone's children. But it will only keep being a blessing if adults stretch themselves out of their comfort zones. We might think children will find it hard to take up the challenge I've given today- the challenge to talk to adults and not just their friends. But I think adults find it just as hard sometimes to talk to children- so there's a challenge here for us as well.

And what Jesus tells us, is that if we will meet this challenge, if we do develop meaningful relationships with children and young people in our church, then they won't just be learning from us, but we'll also be learning from them. And we might just find that our resilience and maturity as disciples is stronger because of the relationships we have with them. We don't run out of things to learn in the Christian life do we? We keep growing right up to the day of our death, or to the day when Jesus returns. And God has given us a family to help minister the grace of Christ to us- a family that includes our peers, and also those much younger than us.

Brothers and sisters, when Paul writes in Ephesians 4 about the way the Christian family works, he says that God gave the church pastors and teachers 'to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up'. But you notice he doesn't say this is just for the adults. He didn't write a separate chapter for the children and young people. No. All Christ's people are to serve- for the building of

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon' by David Kinnaman & Mark Matlock [Baker Books, 2019]. The five practices are (in summary): intimacy with Jesus, cultural discernment, intergenerational relationships, training for discipleship, countercultural mission.

<sup>2</sup> See Table 9 on p.140.

the body. We're all to serve each other. And then he talks about the goal. And Paul says we serve each other 'until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ'<sup>3</sup>.

May this always be a picture of our church family, by the grace of Jesus, and for his glory.

Your brother and servant,

Simon.

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<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 4:12-13.