



Children in the Bible



Anne Richards

Dr Anne Richards is part of the policy adviser team for the Church of England. She is National Adviser for mission theology, new religious movements and alternative spiritualities. She is the author of *Children in the Bible: A fresh approach* (London: SPCK, 2013).

Many people think the world of the Bible is so far distant in time that it can't really help very much with issues about the lives of today's children. Yet beneath immediate practical questions about having children and bringing them up, there are, even for people who don't practice a faith, often deeply spiritual concerns about birth, infancy and children's lives as they grow up. Does God love and care for children? Do children matter? How do we make sense of times when children get sick, or die? What place do children have in the world's future? Should children even be brought into a world like ours, at all?

In fact, Scripture remains deeply relevant and helpful in answering these questions as we navigate our own children through today's world. We find children in the Bible who elucidate God's nature so that we can gain a richer understanding of what God wants for them and what God asks of us as parents and carers. In particular, we can discover five important biblical themes about God's relationship with children. We find that God calls children, saves children, commissions them, heals them and blesses them.

How does God call children?

We live in a technological age when we can see unborn babies on an ultrasound scan and penetrate into the hitherto unknown world of the foetus. We know that babies and small children are intensely physical beings, exploring their own bodies and using those bodies to explore the world through the senses. Yet we don't usually

connect this physicality with responding directly to a call from God, but perhaps we should.

In Psalm 139, the writer ponders his first beginnings as an unborn child in the womb: 'For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.' Similarly, in Jeremiah God says, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you' (1.5, NRSV).

These insights from Scripture tell us that God is deeply and intimately involved in our growth and development before as well as after birth. From their earliest moments unborn children are subject to God's call to be and to become. They respond in precisely one way – they grow and develop. This tells us something very important. God's call to children is first to grow as human beings. Their growth in the womb and after birth is a response to a continued calling. God calls us to this human development in body, mind and spirit right through our lives, however long or short, until at the end we are called out of life into God's eternal presence. This means God's call is just the same and just as relevant if babies have disabilities or if they do not make it to birth. There are no failures because every human person is 'known'. Every child is precious before God and subject to exactly the same call.

This also means that when we look at our children and marvel at how they grow, change and develop, we are not just seeing physical change, but something deeply spiritual, a response to a divine vocation, God at work and in relationship. So children can never be less important than anyone

NOTES

1. Verses 13–14 (NRSV).
2. See Luke 2.39–45.
3. See Matthew 2.18.
4. W Brueggemann, 'Vulnerable Children, Divine Passion and Human Obligation', in M Bunge, *The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 399–422.
5. See Exodus 1.15–22.
6. See 1 Kings 3.16–28.
7. See Genesis 21.14–20.
8. E.g. trafficking of children for labour or sex-work, female genital mutilation, child pornography and child exploitation.
9. See 1 Samuel 3.1–18.
10. See Luke 2.41–52.
11. See Mark 10.13–16.

else and they can never be less important within the Church. Similarly, we cannot treat the unborn child as disposable or less than human, without cutting across the divine love and vocation that is uniquely and eternally focussed upon him or her.

We see divine vocation in Luke's Gospel with the wonderful story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth.² Both women have parallel stories: neither expects to be pregnant and each stands in the presence of a miracle. Elizabeth says that her own unborn baby responded immediately with joy to the presence of the other; it is an unborn child who is the first to recognise and respond to Jesus and who causes Elizabeth to give joyful thanks and praise.

It is not surprising then, that parents often find childbirth a profoundly spiritual experience and one which brings them close to God, and brings about a powerful sense of gratitude and miracle. To have been the nurturers and deliverers of God's vocation teaches us something important about ourselves as witnesses of God's action in the world. It also helps us make sense of God's supreme act of self-giving in the incarnation of Jesus, conceived in Mary's womb and born just as we are born. When we look upon children growing, playing, investigating the world and physically changing, we are being given insights into how God works in creation, making, changing and sustaining the universe. So when children today suffer abuse, neglect, or their lives are damaged by famine, war or disease, these things cut across the way God calls them into fullness of their humanity. As we respond as adults to God's continuing vocation to be human, God lays on us the charge to make a world fit for our children to grow.

How do we know God wants children to have life?

In 2015 the world was horrified at the photograph of a drowned three-year-old child who perished in an attempt by his father to reach Europe via a dangerous sea crossing. We feel instinctively that children above all should have the chance of life and that the death of a child is a particular violation of the way life is supposed to work out. Yet despite all our sophistication, development and technology, we still live in a world where children continue to die needlessly every day through disease, violence, war, poverty or exploitation.

The Bible acts as a powerful commentary on a world in which children die because of human ignorance and human evil. Since Scripture tells us that the child is called first of all to grow and develop, it follows that we can say that God does not want any child to die. That may seem particularly ironic when we read Scripture, because its children do die, *all the time*. The world of the Bible is one where violence, famine and disease deprive endless children of life. Jeremiah 31.15 gives us the sounds of terrible grief: 'Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they

are no more' (NRSV). It echoes again when Herod is determined to murder the child Jesus.³ Walter Brueggeman finds in the idea of the weeping mother a powerful metaphor for God, responding to the death of children with grief and lament, and also finds God as a furious she-bear whose cubs have been killed (e.g. Hosea 13.8), filled with rage against evil.⁴ God's grief and anger in response to the death of the young should shock us into action, repentance and change.

So if the children of the Bible die all the time, where do we see God enabling children to be saved for life? Brueggeman finds a third metaphor in the idea of the courageous midwives who risk everything defying Pharaoh by saving rather than killing the firstborn Hebrew children.⁵ Midwives oversee births, watching over them and bringing children safely into our world. So God, too, is the caring midwife of all of us, guiding us through our lives, making it possible to respond to our personal calling to be human with a 'yes' to God of our own volition.

One of the most interesting stories about this is the judgement of Solomon.⁶ The story is ostensibly about two women arguing about who is the mother of a living child, but the heart of the story is the tragedy of a dead baby. Solomon's judgement is to order the death of the living child, prompting his real mother to sacrifice her claim in order to save him, thus identifying her to Solomon. Through Solomon we learn of God's desire for the preservation and the salvation of children, whole and in the care of loving parents. Similarly, we learn that God hears the cry of the dying Ishmael, abandoned by Abraham in the desert, and God inspires his mother to find water to save him.⁷ In the parallel story of Ishmael's half-brother Isaac, we learn of God's testing Abraham, leading him almost to the sacrifice of his son, before he learns the hard way that God intends that both Isaac and Ishmael should be spared. God is a God of life, not death.

These aspects of God give us clues to the ways in which we too can advocate for children. Children who are hurt by others need our loud grief and horror to be expressed; we need to be caring, open and hospitable midwives, through nursing, through fostering, through teaching, through careful attention to what children really need in order to flourish and grow. We also sometimes need to be she-bears, inflamed with God's passion for issues in our society which need urgent attention.⁸

God finds children worthy of healing

The passion of God for saving children also comes out throughout Scripture in stories of healing. We learn about God's desire for children to have healthy, fulfilled lives when children who are sick, or even dead, are restored to wholeness.

Perhaps one of the most important is the healing of Jairus' daughter in Mark 5.21–43. Jesus is on his way to see the sick child when people approach

and tell Jairus that she is dead and that he should not bother Jesus any more. The child was always at the bottom of the social heap, being young and female, and now she is dead. Yet Jesus does not stop but carries on to the house. Once there, he does not spend time talking to the adults about what is, or is not, to be done. Instead he gets rid of the mourners and speaks directly to the child, 'Little girl, get up' and she immediately responds. Only then does Jesus turn to her parents and give them instruction about her physical needs. It is a powerful statement of God's desire for the wholeness and health of those who are most powerless and vulnerable, and a profound affirmation of the value of the child's life.

This healing miracle tells us something important about how we should respond to children who are today in need of healing – children who are dying of preventable diseases; children dying in war zones; refugee children; children who come to school unable to learn because they are famished or exhausted; children who are acting as carers for adults or taking care of siblings. Many of them are simply hidden from sight, lost to welfare, forgotten by authorities, or are yesterday's news story. We are called to follow Jesus into those places, cut through all the red tape and arguments of the adult world and do whatever we can to save those children, nurture them and give them a positive future.

How does God commission children?

We all know that children can blurt out awkward truths at the wrong moment. We are also often guilty of trying to reinterpret and reframe their faith when they talk about God in ways that don't 'fit' with what we like to hear. Yet God's Spirit emerges in the lives of children in all kinds of ways and we need to discern it.

Two particular biblical examples tell us that when children develop and grow in response to God's vocation to 'be', the experience of being a child provides a spiritual space in which that child can recognise God's presence, and accept and respond to God's specific invitation. Samuel hears God calling him very specifically by name and learns that what God wants him to do is to give his own teacher a stern and frightening message about his behaviour and that of his sons.⁹ Similarly, Jesus remains behind in Jerusalem and worries his parents who cannot find him. When they go back they discover that by staying in the synagogue with the teachers there, he has discovered and confirmed his particular vocation.¹⁰ He needed a space to assess who he was and what he was about, allowing him to redefine his relationship with his parents and with God. All of us who are parents have felt like Mary and Joseph, worrying about our children, trying to keep them in sight, only to discover that they need space and time, even if it inconveniences us or even frightens us. Yet somehow we have to have the confidence to step back and allow God's vocation to

work in our children, even if we don't like where it takes them or what burdens it lays on us.

God blesses children

The Bible shows God acting to call, commission, save and heal children and this tells us a great deal about what God wants for the lives of children. However, one of the most powerful Gospel stories is where Jesus insists that children in the crowd be brought to him for blessing.¹¹ In a lot of illustrations of this story, Jesus is seen beaming while children sit on his lap and lambs gambol around. In reality, Jesus was completely furious with his disciples for keeping the children away from him. His deliberate act of blessing children, the lowliest of the low, is a powerful sign and a political act about how his kingdom works, and is both shocking and bewildering. But Jesus goes further than this by suggesting that 'whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it' (Luke 18.17, NRSV). We do not just learn from the Bible about how children are to be valued, loved and cared for and what sort of lives God wants for them; Jesus says that we must learn *from* children; they tell us important things about our own spiritual health. This is how we learn how to become children of God.

What does that mean for us? It means that the way we behave towards children in our society – exploiting their powerlessness, ruling on their futures, treating them as trophies, sexualising them, flooding them with consumerism and merchandise – is contrary to Jesus' kingdom values of prioritising children, recognising God's intention for them and blessing them. To be blessed is a radical act of privilege and grace, and also a challenge, because so often in becoming adults we have forgotten or eclipsed God's vocation in us. We have assumed we are more important than what God has called us to be. So the blessing of the children is a shock to us; we find it difficult to learn the lesson in humility that God privileges them over us.

Conclusion

Many people today are concerned about the wisdom of bringing new children into the world and are worried about what to do to keep them safe and help them navigate childhood and growing up. Yet through reading Scripture we discover important insights about how God loves and advocates for children, calling them from their earliest moments to be and to grow, so that they may, if they respond to God's grace, become willing agents and instruments of God's purpose to those of us who have forgotten what it is to be children. Scripture gives us insights into our role as parents and carers, but also into the demand of God to save children from danger, suffering and injustice. Finally, children give back to us what God's kingdom is really like; they teach us what the world is meant to be. They teach us the means of our inheritance and adoption as children of God.