

MARCH 1, 2025 FATHER GUSTAVE INEZ

Dear brothers and sisters, the biblical scholar John Donahue proposes that the passage about children being brought to Jesus follows the one on divorce and women's rights because, like women in the first century, divorce laws did not consider the rights of women. So, children also lacked legal rights. Donahue also suggests that this text appears in Mark's Gospel due to a contemporary debate about whether children should be admitted to the Church. Jesus' act of laying hands on them and blessing them symbolizes a rite of admission. So, in the time of Mark, there was a debate if children should be accepted in the Church.

Ultimately, John Donahue believes that these passages are placed together because both women and children represented the powerless, a category of people that was of particular concern for Jesus.

The disciples' misunderstanding is central to today's Gospel. Throughout the whole Gospel of Mark, a recurring theme emerges. The disciples struggle to fully grasp the nature of Jesus' mission. They anticipated a messiah characterized by power and triumph, not a servant who would champion the forgotten and the marginal. This is why, in many instances throughout Mark's Gospel when Jesus healed somebody, he often instructed that person and even his disciples not to spread the news. This was to prevent a misunderstanding of his true identity and mission. This recurring theme, known as the Messianic Secret, is found in multiple passages and reflects Jesus' desire to avoid misconception about who he truly was, and we will apply this to today's Gospel.

Dear brothers and sisters, the best way to approach reading the Gospel of Mark is to start with the final chapters, which recount the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. They were probably the first ones to be written, and then the rest was written after. Mark's account is strikingly

different from the other Gospels. In this narrative, Jesus is abandoned by his disciples, and many of the profound words we associate with his crucifixion in other Gospels are absent in the Gospel according to Mark. As Isidore Clarke, a British Dominican priest, points out, Mark's Gospel lacks so many of the things we find in other Gospels; the pregnant moments found as well. There are no disciples or followers standing by the cross. Jesus does not pray for those crucifying him, "Forgive them because they don't know what they are doing." He does not forgive the repentant thief. He does not entrust his mother to his beloved disciple, nor does he declare, "It is accomplished" or commit his spirit into the hands of his Father. Instead, the only words Jesus speaks on the cross in the Gospel according to Mark are "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani." "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

I am sure I may have said this before about the Gospel according to Mark, but we have always to go back to these, because they help us understand whatever happens throughout the Gospel of Mark. This portrayal is perhaps the most depressing account of the Lord's passion. He was abandoned by his friends, his disciples. The disciples did not understand his mission, so they abandoned him. The only person who spoke at the end was the Roman centurion: a foreigner, a Gentile, who said, "Surely this man was the Son of God." And we remember that Mark wrote this Gospel in Rome for a Gentile public, people who had not been Jewish before. So, he's basically telling them that their struggles to understand is no different from the one that the disciples had.

So, in today's passage, coming back to today's Gospel, the misunderstanding is clear. The disciples did not understand why children

should be near Jesus. When children are brought to Jesus, the disciples rebuke them, assuming such interruptions were beneath the teacher's attention. Yet, Jesus' indignant response turns their perspective upside down. He declares that the kingdom of God belongs to those who are like children: humble, dependent and vulnerable. This moment encapsulates the disciples' ongoing struggle. Despite their closeness to Jesus, they were blinded by their preconceived ideas of greatness, and this blindness would later manifest in their abandonment of Jesus during his arrest, as they failed to reconcile their vision of a triumphant leader with the reality of a messiah who chose humility and suffering.

The little ones and the forgotten were close to the heart of Jesus. In Jesus' embrace of the children, we witness a powerful revelation of God's priorities. The little ones represent not only children, but all who are marginalized, vulnerable and overlooked. How do we, often in our churches, in our societies, overlook those who lack status or influence? How often do we fail to see Christ in the poor, the neglected or the abused? Pope Francis has addressed this with urgency, particularly speaking about the grievous sin of child abuse in the Church. And we know that it is one of the vilest of the crimes imaginable, and the pope spoke about that.

So, this is a call to action. We are called to have Jesus' affection towards those who are excluded. Mark's Gospel reminds us that Jesus' identity as the suffering servant is not only a historical truth, but a living challenge. It calls us to walk in humility and service, to see the kingdom of God in the faces of the little ones and to never hinder their approach to him. Let us pray for the grace to embrace his calling with open hearts. May we become a church that reflects the love of Christ, standing with the vulnerable, protecting the innocent, and embodying the radical inclusivity of God's kingdom. Amen.