

Karl Barth – Child Theologian?

By Haddon Willmer

Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen *God's Search for Man* (English translation, 1935) is a collection of sermons. It includes one called 'The New Beginning', on the text of Matthew 18.1-9. It shows Barth was a child theologian.

The sermon begins:

Jesus places children before us. He uses them as a parable in order to say something decisive to us. Children are people who still stand at the beginning of life....For them... everything is filled with possibility and promise; life is an open book filled with unwritten pages....

For us (grown-ups) it is too late for almost everything. We do not have an undeveloped life before us. On the contrary, we have run ourselves fast into ruts or run our lives into an *impasse*.....we have become fossilized in our vocation, our work...we work as in a treadmill....We are faithful in our married life, but we simply drag it along as though it were a burden... Still more important, our faults, our failings, our sins.... today we scarcely resist at all. But we groan and suffer.

Is not this the really burdensome feature about growing older, that we are forced to see, in so many ways, that going back again is no longer possible?

But listen! "Unless you turn and become as little children."

What does that mean?There is such a thing as a new beginning...

[With Jesus] there is this possibility of a new beginning in a life that has already grown old. We have really said everything that can be said about Jesus when we say that....It means to be an old scarred man, in just such a predicament...one without hope, without possibilities, and then, of a sudden, to face this: "Come to me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will revive you!"

Revitalization that comes from Jesus [does not] mean that we must become actual children, childish people.....in many external and internal things we cannot go back again. But in the main thing we can go back...

After this beginning, the sermon talks about the new creation in Jesus, the kingdom of heaven, which is Jesus himself, in the movement from God toward us, so that now we may know God is among us, and we are directed towards God.

Being turned towards God in Jesus, in this way, is the forgiveness of sins: a new beginning of life in God, for those who have been separated from God by sin, where we live in hopeless ruts.

The text talks of receiving the child: the sermon says: 'As the child beseechingly approaches us, to be received of us, so there are times in our lives and in the life of generations where the new thing which God wishes to say to us comes very close to us.' And then it is a terrible thing to miss the opportunity, which is done in many different ways, laying stumbling blocks and falsifying the good news of God. It is better to enter the kingdom of God one-eyed or maimed than to miss it and be shut out.

Jesus Christ is not only a cripple, lame, one-eyed, but dishonoured, condemned, hanged. In his case, entering the Kingdom was by way of that cross, by way of that sacrifice which was without parallel.

'We are all too strong in ourselves to become really weak before God, so that He can be strong in us in the power of his forgiveness. This is the strength of the humble and small and, as such, the beginning of the life to which Jesus calls us. "Whosoever humbles himself as this little child, he is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven." Therefore, "if you do not turn and become as the children...."

So the sermon ends.

Browsing in Barth's *Church Dogmatics (CD)* and other writings shows that this text, Matt. 18.1-9, along with Matt.11.25-30, was in his mind and heart. Not surprisingly, it often breaks out in his writing.

I have found the following examples – doubtless there are more: CD Vol 1.Part 2 p 261, 330; 2.2 p 438; 3.3 p 434; 3.4 pp 612-614; 4.1 p 190; 4.2 pp 170, 548.

The Christian Life was published in 1981 after Barth's death (1968), from material he had prepared but not finished for the next volume of *Church Dogmatics*. This book is structured around the first petitions of the Lord's Prayer, and has sections on the Father and on the children. There is a note (p 81) on Matt.11.25//Luke 10.21.

The revelation is 'made exclusively to babes' (who are 'obviously not to be construed as stupid or muddleheaded people'). 'The wholly new thing that has come in Jesus is open only to those people who are an adequate match, who are open to it, because they have nothing behind them, because they are not stopped or blocked up against it by any intellectual, moral, aesthetic, or religious *a priori* that they have brought with them, because they are empty pages. This is plainly the point of the story about the child that Jesus set in the midst of his disputing disciples....

...the fools of Paul are no more [stupid or muddleheaded] than are the babes and children of the Gospels. What distinguishes them from others is the ability to accept the radical new beginning which is made with men, apart from any enterprise of their own, in the gospel of the Father and the Son, in the Word of the cross. What distinguishes them is the willingness to begin at this new beginning...'

So Barth at the end of his life was saying what he said in an early sermon he had talked about with his friend Thurneysen.

We should not overlook the quite remarkable passages in the pamphlet of 1945 called *The Germans and Ourselves*. The argument is not simple, and any summary or excerpt may open the way to caricature and dismissal. The passage on p 33 should be read in the context of the whole work and indeed of Barth's serious theological engagement with the profound issues raised by German history and experience in the twentieth century, in the context of Europe and especially his own Switzerland. Here, he says that Germans in 1945 must be seen by the Swiss as under a judgment which the Swiss also fundamentally deserve, though they are spared its material military enactment. Being under judgment, the Germans should be seen with sympathy – a dangerous and unpopular message. And seen 'in awe'.

'How could we not bow before the situation in which another has had, however justly, every support struck away, and in which nothing, nothing at all, seems to be left to him but to start afresh, in the midst of most difficult circumstances and conditions...? ... A whole people seems to be so rarely given even the opportunity to start afresh.... What a rare distinction above the ninety-nine righteous, to receive even the opportunity!'

Once again, the fresh start, though no child this time.

After this Barth argues that in this situation the Germans need friends and have to learn friendship. That is what Jesus offers them. Here he quotes again Matt 11.28, *Come to me all you that labour and are heavy laden*. This text describes the opportunity given to the Germans in 1945. He goes on, as though Jesus himself addresses this invitation to all sorts of Germans, including 'wicked Hitler boys and girls, brutal SS soldiers, evil Gestapo police, sad compromisers and collaborationists, men of the herd who have moved so long in patient stupidity behind your so-called leader...Come to me, ...I will refresh you, I will start afresh from zero with you...I am for you, I am your friend.' (pp 40-41)

Refreshing goes with starting afresh; and starting afresh is the only thing we are left with when we are at zero.

There are other references to be found in Eberhard Jüngel's book, *Karl Barth: A theological legacy* (1986). Jüngel's talk to students the day after Barth's death in 1968, 'A Tribute at His Death' is a wonderfully succinct description of Barth's theological being. He notes Barth's self-criticism, which was a reflection of his relation to the subject matter of theology: 'it consisted in always beginning anew with that subject matter' (p 17). On the path of theology there are no finished results; to go forward meant always to begin once again at the beginning – because the Omega is ever the Alpha. In the beginning was the Word, Jesus Christ. Barth held fast to this concrete beginning.

It seems Barth not merely made the child placed in the midst by Jesus a significant part of the content of his theology, but he saw the child as a clue about how to be a theologian.