

# Sunday Service Celebrating the Children in your Congregation

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*A plan for a church service which highlights the importance of valuing children and those who work with them.*

Bible Base: Matthew 21:1–11, 14–16; Matthew 18:1–5

## Advance planning

- As part of the service you will be including quotations from children and children's leaders celebrating good things about your church's work with children. Prepare a mixture of quotations either on PowerPoint, acetate or handout, and have a few people primed to be interviewed briefly during the service.
- As part of the service you will be commissioning those in your church who work with children: leaders of children's groups, school staff, care workers etc. Remember to invite them to the service well in advance!
- As part of the service, involve children as much as possible in welcoming people, in giving out books at the door, in a music group, in leading appropriate parts of the service, or other suitable roles.
- As a result of the service you could link up with a church somewhere across the world involved in working with street children, perhaps through your denominational links.

Think, pray and plan for all of these well in advance!

### You will need:

- Balloons (inflated in readiness), luggage labels and pens for the praise activity.
- A young child, to be a visual aid. Ask the child and their parent or carer in advance of the service, explaining what you will want them to do.
- A cardboard box, table and blanket, and bottle.
- PowerPoint slides, OHP sheets or handouts of responsive prayer, commissioning and quotations from children and children's leaders about your children's activities.

## Service

Welcome everyone and introduce the theme. Include a short prayer that everyone will meet with God, be inspired to praise him and learn from him.

### *Song of praise*

Choose something that is suitable for all ages, especially children.

### *Reading*

Read Matthew 21:1–11, 14–16. This could be a straight reading, be read with sound effects or be dramatised.

### ***Talk 1***

Ask people to put up their hands if they are a child... or an adult. Comment on what you see – whether everyone does so accurately, or if some pretend to be younger or older.

- Do the teenagers see themselves as children or adults (or neither)?
- What, apart from age, makes a child a child and an adult an adult?
- Do adults always behave as adults, or do they ever behave as children? Ask for some examples.
- Do children ever behave as adults? Ask for examples of that.
- What is the best thing about behaving as a child?

Say: When Jesus entered Jerusalem he was welcomed as king. Both adults and children cheered him in this way. But later, at the temple, the chief priests and teachers of the law picked on the children who were shouting ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’, and told them off. But they were welcoming Jesus as Messiah! Jesus commended them: they were doing what the Psalmist had said had to happen because God is so great!

So we’re going to learn from them and praise God in our next song.

### ***Song***

Choose a song of praise

### ***Prayers of praise***

Adapt the following activity to suit your congregation. As a simple option, ask children and adults to shout out praise to God.

Alternatively, give out luggage labels and pens. Ask everyone to write a word or very short prayer of praise to God. Tie these on the balloons, and as you re-sing the first verse or chorus of the last song, encourage children to bat them around the room (with care). When you stop singing, let them come to the microphone to read out some of the phrases, or you read them out as a prayer of praise.

Follow this with the following responsive prayer, or a similar prayer of confession and thanksgiving for forgiveness.

**Leader:** Lord Jesus, the children at the temple couldn’t be stopped from singing your praises, but sometimes we are slow even to begin. For the times when we have forgotten you...

**Response:** Forgive us, Lord Jesus.

**Leader:** Lord Jesus, just a few days later after people sang your praises, you were killed on a cross so that we could be forgiven for all the wrong in our lives. For all that you endured so that we could have a new start...

**Response:** Thank you, Lord Jesus.

**Leader:** Lord Jesus, you gave us your Holy Spirit to make us more like you and teach us more about you. For all that we want to be by his power at work in us...

**Response:** Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

### ***Celebrate***

Using a mix of short interviews and comments on PowerPoint, acetate or a handout, celebrate what your church is doing with children. You might include some or all of the following:

- If you have run a holiday club or similar activity over the summer, celebrate the good things that happened during and because of it.
- Ask the leaders of your church's different regular activities for children to say what they want to celebrate about the work.
- Give the children a chance to say what they want to celebrate about these activities.

### ***Song***

Choose a song which emphasized that God wants everyone to come to him.

### ***Comment***

Ask: who is the greatest human being ever? Ask for some suggestions. A few years ago the BBC ran a poll to find the greatest Briton ever, and viewers voted that title to Winston Churchill, wartime Prime Minister. So who is the greatest human being present here today? (And the answer isn't 'Jesus'!) Ask for some suggestions.

Say: Listen carefully to our next reading from the Bible and then I'll ask again.

### ***Reading***

Read Matthew 18:1–5.

### ***Talk 2***

So what do you think – who is the greatest human being present here today? Ask for some more suggestions. You might not have changed your view, or you might now think the answer is 'the youngest child present'. But in fact if you look closely, the answer is, from verse 4, 'whoever humbles himself like a little child.'

Ask the child you have already arranged to help to come and stand by you, perhaps with their parent or carer. Ask the children what they think the word 'humble' means. Then invite others to comment.

Children – especially very little children – have to trust someone else to look after them for everything. A baby cannot get its own dinner ready; instead it cries, as a way of asking for food from the person looking after it. If a young child has to go to the doctor's they must be taken there by someone else; they don't just find their own way. Instead, they trust that the adults around them will look after them, feed them and care for them. Jesus told his disciples that they must be like that if they wanted to be great in God's kingdom: trusting, allowing God to look after them. In fact he went further than that: they had to become like little children just to enter God's kingdom!

## **Quiz**

Say: Here are three items, and the simple question each time is 'what is this?'

Point fairly quickly to the cardboard box, table and blanket, and shampoo bottle. Take answers only from adults. Then ask the children to answer. In fact the answers are:

- a car, or boat, or plane, or whatever you want to make it;
- a tent, hideaway, den, ship's cabin etc;
- a checkout scanner, space communicator, or whatever your mind can turn it into!

In other words, they can be all these things and much more in the mind and play of a child. So if children see so much potential in these sorts of things, how do they see God? What's their understanding of what it means to follow Jesus? How do they see our world, its joys and problems?

With children having such bright minds, such a trusting and humble nature, and being role models for entry into God's kingdom, it's a big responsibility to work with them. Jesus goes on to tell his disciples that to welcome a child is to welcome him! Just imagine that! Look around you at the children here – or at those younger than you. Welcoming them is like welcoming Jesus here. So we're going to pray for those who work with children and pray for the children in our care.

## **Prayers**

Include a short commissioning and prayer for all who are leaders of church-based activities for children, perhaps using the form given in the appendix. Then pray for teachers and other school staff, recognising and emphasising the role that Christians in school play in making Jesus known by words, actions and attitudes to children who may never go to church and hear about him there. Pray too for any others whose work involves them in the care and wellbeing of children.

End with a prayer for children – you might ask them to stand, or to come to the front of the church for this. Pray for their wellbeing and welfare, their growth and development, their walk towards or with God.

## **What next?**

What more can your church do to celebrate and support children, to ensure their wellbeing and that they hear about Jesus? You could:

- Link up with a church across the world that works to help street children,
- Link up with an organisation or individual in another country working to help children to know Jesus,
- Link up with an organisation or individual in this country working to help children to know Jesus,
- Link up with an organisation or individual in this country working to support and care for children.

## **Final song**

Sing a joyful song to end this celebration.

## Appendix: Commissioning for those who work with children

**Leader:** *To those who work with children week by week as leaders in the various activities*

God has called you to serve him through work with the children of this church: to be Christian role models, to help them meet God through his word and through prayer, and to help them to know Jesus and to follow him. Will you commit yourself to this work?

**Children's team:** I will, with the help of God.

**Leader:** *To those who work in schools*

God has called you to serve him through education and the welfare of children in schools. Will you commit yourself to loving and caring for pupils and staff alike, seeking to make Jesus known as appropriate through your words, actions and attitudes?

**School staff:** I will, with the help of God.

**Leader:** *To those who work in childcare or welfare*

God has called you to serve him through showing compassion and care for children in need. Will you commit yourself to this work, being the hands, feet and face of Jesus to all who need him?

**Children's carers:** I will, with the help of God.

**Leader:** *To the church*

Will you commit yourself to supporting, praying for and encouraging those whom God has also called to work with children?

**Congregation:** We will, with the help of God.