I read an article this week written by an educator who teaches philosophy in elementary schools.[1] In it, she quoted a 10-year-old who said, “I want to know why we work hard and worry about money, and what we’re going to do when we grow up, what we’ll do for work and food and shelter, when one day we’re just all going to die. I mean, what’s the point? What does it mean to be alive?”

The educator laments, in the article, the ways in which we (culturally) tend to dismiss the instinct that many children have to ask such essential and fundamental questions. We diminish their wonderings as “cute” or precocious – chuckling to ourselves as we assume they can’t possibly have the intellectual capacity to begin to really understand what it is they’re asking, let alone think seriously about any actual answers to big questions such as these.

Although we might delight in, or be entertained by, a child’s growing curiosity about the world, we might also see their asking of questions as reinforcing their immaturity. Because as adults, in this society, at least, we tend not to ask so many questions anymore. Maybe that’s because we’ve made up our mind about a lot of things, think we have most of the answers, perhaps. Maybe because we have a whole heap of questions we just don’t think can be answered, life’s too complicated, we can’t ever know. Maybe we feel a bit defeated, things just are the way they are, we’re just one person, it’s not like we can change the world, so what’s the point in asking questions, thinking about alternatives, we might as well just get on with.

[1] https://aeon.co/essays/how-to-do-philosophy-for-and-with-children

I wonder just how different this world might be, if we kept asking questions like the one asked by that 10-year-old. As Christians, as followers of Jesus, the way we think about the big questions has tremendous bearing on the choices we make, the ways we choose to live: why do we work hard and worry, worry about money, worry about what we'll do for work and food and shelter, when one day we're just all going to die. What is the point? What does it mean to be alive?"

These are really important questions to ask.

Another 10-year-old quoted in the article said, "Because adults know so much about what is real and what isn't, they have less imagination about the possibilities." I think adults *think* we know a lot about what's real and what isn't, and this does close down our world. Life experience and the stories we tell ourselves along the way about our lived experience, definitely has us shut down possibilities, limit our thinking to what's "realistic."

And being "realistic" is highly valued; the maturity of being "sensible" much preferred over the wild expansiveness of a child's imaginative frippery, a child's naïve wonderings about what could be possible.

And yet there's something about children that's evidently important in Scripture, something about children we're called to pay attention to.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us we must be like children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven;[2] that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are like children;[3] in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says that whoever welcomes a child, welcomes him.[4]

[2] Matthew 18:4
[3] Matthew 19:14
[4] Mark 9:37

One interpretation, of course, is that children are innocent, they haven't lived enough life yet to have made a complete mess of things. While this is one way of seeing it, I'm inclined to believe there's another reason why children play such a significant role in the depiction of God's realm.

Children in Scripture, I believe, represent the human person before the limits of adult-life clip it and restrict it. Young children have not yet taken on the cultural traits and characteristics that come to define us as adults. Their world is wide open, children know and accept there's a lot they don't understand, so they have expansive imagination for a wide range of possibilities. They lack bias, prejudice, hate, they trust. Young children, by and large, have not yet developed situation-based fears, fears about other people, fears about staying safe, about not having enough. They've not yet developed social and existential fears, they're not worried about embarrassing themselves, or feeling shame, or being judged by others, or being excluded. They're not yet afraid of death.

Young children aren't yet fully bound by the social and cultural expectations of the world they've been born into, they're free to explore and to question and to speak up. They live, arguably, prophetically.

The prophet Isaiah, in today's first reading, imagines a time of peaceable co-existence. An idyllic, bucolic scene is described in which predator and prey live alongside one another, eat alongside one another without fear, and without violence. Completely unrealistic, right? Ridiculous. It's obviously just a metaphor, or a fantastical description of the perfection of the after-life, a spiritual realm,

something entirely other than this world, this 'real' world. This world could never be like that.

Perhaps our grown-up, adult reaction to this scene is precisely why it's young children who are the only humans depicted in it, the only humans who could be in it, because they're the only humans who could imagine this scene ever being possible, or real, or true. Perhaps, as we consider these children, we're being called to remember, or restore, the child-like, prophetic minds we all once had, that we all still have, but that've have gotten buried beneath layers of what's reasonable or sensible or expected.

Children, just like the prophets, are entirely able to imagine a future that's entirely different from the present we're so familiar with, and stuck in, they can imagine it and believe it can be true. What if the only difference between the great prophets and us, us 'ordinary' adults, is they didn't lose that creative, imaginative impulse we all once had as children. As children we all were once free and able to question, to see truth, to recognize and respond to injustice by instinct, to ask questions unrelentingly of the world we live in, and to want a good future, the best future, for all of Creation; kids (and we were all kids once) have a disarming ability to name what's broken and to imagine out-loud what could be possible.

We all, once, lived into the prophetic impulse, before it was eventually smothered by the 'grown up' expectations of being sensible and realistic. But faith is not sensible nor is our hope through faith limited to what we might think of today as realistic; faith, the fullness of faith, the power of faith, is entirely dependent, and always will be, on the disruptive, imaginative prophetic impulse.

Jesus calls us into maturity of faith, but this is a maturity we can perhaps only ever hope to achieve if we insist on working to reclaim the prophetic child we all once were; if we question, challenge, speak up and imagine, as we once did, just like children do.

What questions about this world might our own 5-year-old self ask, our 10-year-old self? What questions does the child still within us want, today, to ask about life, and its purpose? What kind of a future might the child we once were imagine, truly believe could be possible?

Jesus came, lived, and gave his life that we might at the very least imagine a restored, peaceful, just society in which there's freedom and fullness of life for all. We may not all be called to bear bold, prophetic witness as adults, but we can all reclaim the ability to ask big, important questions, just like we once did; big, important questions, of this life and the world we live in. We can all reclaim the expansive imagination we all once had as children; see creative possibilities in the world around us; refuse to be entirely reasonable, or sensible. Effective faith depends on the prophetic imagination. If we're to walk with Jesus, be co-creators of God's realm right here, in this life, the prophetic imagination must lead the way; because before we can begin to even consider building something new, we have to be able, like children, to imagine it and believe it can be done.