

Sermon on Luke 18: 15-17

Child's Play

So, as we gather together today, a child, Noah, has been set at the heart of our worship.

We've washed his little head with the waters of baptism and affirmed that God's love for him begins long before he can even be aware of it.

We love because God first loved us.

What a great blessing this is.

Noah, before he even knows it, is a sign of God's love for the whole world.

Wonderful.

But if we're honest, all of us have at some point sat in church and found children a distraction.

I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but I imagine we can all think back to a time when we've wanted children out of the way for a bit of peace and quiet.

Too much noise, too much interruption.

They run when they're supposed to walk, speak when they're supposed to listen, and often don't obey the tacit protocols we adults have set up.

They're awkward as much as they're lovely.

I'm not saying children should be left to behave any way they want.

We were just about force fed sultanas in church when I was a boy to keep us settled.

Mum used to dole them out with a reckless abandon the likes of which wouldn't have occurred at any other time of the week.

She was like selling the good stuff and we were buying.

Children do need guidance and boundaries, of course they do, it's a part of learning and growing.

But like many of us at different times, the disciples too felt the children would be a distraction to Jesus, so they sought to get them out of the way.

Jesus was on the way to the cross in Jerusalem.

The last thing he needed was the hassle of kids.

Noise, distraction, eager parents.

All nothing but a bother.

Give us some space people, don't you know where we're going and what we're doing... this is adults' business, not child's play.

But Jesus won't have it.

He smashes their assumptions and says, no let the little children come to me.

Faith, as it turns out, is child's play.

As I was sitting down to write this sermon, a little girl bounced across the lawn at the front of the old manse to look at the flowers.

No doubt enchanted by their colours, she turned to the lady who I assume was her grandmother.

'Can I pick one?', she said.

The grandmother wasn't quite sure, so she hesitated.

Then, as serendipitous grace had it, one of our church family here happened to be around and see this happening.

He came over, 'Would you like a flower?', he asked.

'Yes please.'

So he proceeded to cut not just one, but two flowers for the little girl, one red and one yellow.

She clutched them like they were her new prized possessions, like their value was greater than gold, enraptured by their lovely colours, and ever so thankful someone had been there to help her out.

Her day had been made.

It is a mistake to sentimentalise children of course, they can be as stubborn, disobedient, hard to handle as anyone, trust me I have four of them.

Well practiced.

But there was something about the sheer, uncomplicated delight in that little girl's face, something about the simple wonder of the gift offered and received, that surely has something to teach us about faith in Jesus.

There was no logic, no reasoned arguments about the beauty of flowers or forensic descriptions about the biological conditions that makes them grow.

Just the plain reception of the gift with delight and humility.

Jesus says, 'Let the little children come to me for to such as these belongs the Kingdom of God', but he goes one step further.

'Anyone who will not receive the KOG like a little child', he says, 'will not enter it.'

Children become the sign by which we see what it looks like to receive and offer God's love faithfully.

It's hard to know exactly what Jesus means.

Children were counted as nothing in the ancient world, possessions of their fathers.

Perhaps that's what is meant.

We are to become as nothing for others as Jesus does at Easter.

Or perhaps it's about the willingness of children to trust.

No pretence, no corruptibility, just a guileless love.

Or perhaps it's about the way children are able to forgive each other.

They brush themselves off and quickly little injuries are forgotten and relationships restored.

My hunch is it's probably all of these at once.

But there's surely something also to the way children delight in the small graces of life that reveals what Jesus is on about.

Children see the world with the dew still on it, with colours and surprises and joys we adults so often overlook or dismiss.

Children are innocent not because they are perfect, but because they look on the world with an innocence that seemingly wholly believes that there are miracles around every corner.

It's almost as if they can still see the world as God intended us all to see it...

It's why we rightly respond with such anger when children are used as political pawns, disregarded, put in harm's way, and manipulated for profit or gratification.

Children look on the world with deep expectation.

As if God is just waiting to reveal a new moment of grace.

As the parents brought their children to Jesus for blessing, even at this late hour in his journey, even as the disciples wanted to shew them away, he saw in them a picture of God's own Kingdom.

There's a wonderful sculpture of St Francis up at the Abbey Aged Care Village in Mittagong.

It's a telling contrast where Francis is sculpted as this giant of a man with big limbs and big presence, and he's holding out on his hand in front of him a tiny sparrow.

And his eyes are fixed on the little bird as if there's nothing else in the world.

As if everything he might need to know or see is bound up in that tiny creature.

And despite its size, it is in this gift of grace that a spot of revelation might be found.

Sheer wonder, sheer delight, sheer grace.

Just as we might find such great wonder in God's love for the little child, Noah, we baptised in Jesus' name this morning.

Can we live faith like this?

Can we receive the Kingdom of God with the wonder and delight of a child?

It is something that we receive, a gift given in grace.

The nature of God's gift in Jesus does not change depending on our response, but Jesus is trying to say let your receiving reflect the gift itself, which is given freely, openly, without expectation of payment in return, but with a deep longing to find connection and relationship and joy.

Let yourself wonder at how God loves you, with all your flaws, all your insecurities.

Like the child with her flowers, like St Francis with his sparrow.

Look on God's love with the innocence of a child, receive it in the like manner with which it is given.

The disciples, like our modern world does so often, want the children out of the way, Jesus wants them at the heart of things.

Sees them at the heart of things.

The heart of God's Kingdom and the heart of what it means to follow him.

Hang on, you might say, life is a little more complex than that, a little more dangerous, a little more challenging.

What place has this rather naïve sounding faith in this kind of world?

It's a reasonable question.

I'm guessing Jesus had an inkling of that too though.

He was on his way to Jerusalem after all.

And still he takes the children, blesses them, and says this is how you must receive the kingdom, as a child, in awe and wonder at God's love.

In the midst of it all, of all of life's frailties and struggles and busy-ness, today we have received a little child into the family of faith and declared God's love for him.

This is not a cynical but a hopeful view of the world and of all that is.

We have received this little boy by faith and in him received a message about ourselves and about God.

That is surely miracle enough for any of us whatever the complexities or sorrows of our lives.

And if we find ourselves with eyes and hearts uplifted in delight at this singular moment, that is surely enough for us to see God's wider intention for how we are to be always.

All we have to do now is to learn how to live like it, trust like it, follow like it.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.