

A LITTLE CHILD WILL LEAD THEM

Little children have a special place in our hearts.

In spite of our distaste for all the hype and hoopla and toy-mania that goes on during this time of the year, it's hard not to be infected with their excitement.

They may be looking forward more to the toys than to the celebration of Jesus' birth, but their enthusiasm is still infectious.

I challenge anyone to visit one of our preschool classes on one of the days before Christmas and say, "Bah, humbug."

Yes, we delight in our children, but children were not always viewed as affectionately as we view them.

In many ancient societies, children were regarded as an expendable nuisance.

Edomites and Canaanites routinely offered up children as human sacrifices to their pagan gods.

The ancient Greeks and Romans disposed of unwanted babies by abandoning or drowning them.

Ancient philosophers like Cicero and Tacitus had no problem with infanticide.

It was only after the Roman Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the major religion of the Roman Empire that children came to be accorded full status as human beings and infanticide was declared illegal.

Whether one approves or disapproves of merging religion and politics, you have to admit that this was a positive development as far as children were concerned.

Later in history, the pendulum swung the other way and children came to be idolized.

The Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, declared that "*the child is father of the man*" and believed that children came into this world from a prenatal paradise, "*trailing clouds of glory*" as they arrived.

He was convinced that when people became adults they lost their ability to discern the beauty of creation that children could clearly see.

Wordsworth and others like him had a lot of influence over modern attitudes toward children.

In the sixties there was a resurgence of the idea that "the young" were pure and good and adults were corrupt and evil: remember, "*Don't trust anyone over thirty*"?

Even today many people believe that children are innately good and need only to have their self-esteem nourished in order to grow up and become good and responsible adults.

They'd have trouble selling idea that to preschool teachers who deal with the less-than-perfect side of children every day.

The truth, of course, is that just like their mothers and fathers and teachers, children arrive in this world as fallen creatures in need of redemption.

They are cute, but they are far from perfect.

Children are set forth in a special light in the Bible.

Jesus admonished his disciples to *“Let the little children come unto me, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”*

He told his disciples that adults need to *become* like little children in order to enter the Kingdom of God: *“I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”*

What do you suppose Jesus meant by this?

Is he saying that children are less sinful than adults and more deserving of the Kingdom of God than adults are?

That would be a strange thing for Jesus to say.

The Bible makes it clear that no one enters the Kingdom of God on the basis of their own merit, but only by God's grace.

So, no, the fitness of children for the kingdom of God has nothing to do with any natural virtues that they possess.

What it does have to do with are two things that children do a lot better than adults do: they know how to believe and they know how to receive.

First, children know how to believe: faith comes easily to a little child.

A child has no problem placing his faith in someone bigger and stronger than he is to take care of him.

He instinctively knows how to *trust*.

So that's number one.

In the second place, children have no problem receiving gifts: they will eagerly receive anything you want to give them (except brussels sprouts).

Have you ever heard a child say, "*Oh I wouldn't feel right accepting that. I just don't deserve it!*"

I don't think so! Children will joyfully receive what you offer them.

Children naturally trust others and they welcome gifts.

And there's a reason they do these things so naturally.

They live in a state of complete dependency.

They *have* to depend upon others—usually their mothers and fathers---to supply their needs..

And this is how God wants us to feel toward Him.

Our Father in heaven wants us to trust him and he wants us to joyfully receive the gifts he offers us.

If we can accept Him on these terms, we too are fit to live in his kingdom.

But he will not have it any other way.

So the kingdom of God belongs to those who know how to trust Jesus and to gratefully receive the gifts he offers: forgiveness of their sins, guidance as they make their way through this world, and eternal life in heaven above.

This trust and willingness to receive what God offers is called *faith*, which is why Paul wrote that we are saved by God's grace through our faith.

Unfortunately, we struggle with this.

As we grow up we begin to trust other things than God to supply our needs: our natural abilities, our hard work, our good deeds, our savings, our plans for the future.

And sometimes God takes away some of those things so that we are left with only Him to trust.

That may not feel like love, but it is.

And this brings us to another mention of a child—one that appears this evening's *Old Testament* lesson.

Isaiah says of those who inhabit the kingdom of God that, *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given. And the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end."*

These words are a powerful reminder of how radically different the kingdom of God is from the kingdom of this world.

In fact, in many ways the kingdom of God is the exact reverse of the kingdom of this world.

Consider the difference between how one acquires wisdom in the two kingdoms.

In the kingdom of this world wisdom comes through age and experience.

In the Kingdom of God, wisdom comes as a gift of the Holy Spirit,

In the kingdom of this world, we are governed by men.

In the Kingdom of God we are governed by a child.

But the child is a very, very special child.

Luther once said that sometimes when he looked into the Scriptures he seemed to see the face of a child peering out at him.

And we know who that child was—and is.

For in the fullness of time, God came to us in the form of a child.

And this is where the Gospel appears to us in its most simple and yet radical form.

Consider for a moment: what spinner of fairy tales, what mythmaker or poet would have conjured up a story about an all-powerful God who created the universe and then entered it as a helpless infant with the express purpose of growing up to be reviled, tortured and murdered in the most barbarous way imaginable?

Does that sound like a story a human would write?

No, the only person who could write a story like that would be God Himself.

And so it came to pass.

A child, an infant, who nursed at his mother's breast, came to usher in a new kingdom and to govern it as its king.

And it is to this infant that we cling with all our faith.

It is this child and Him alone that we trust to lead us through the minefield of this fallen world, this swamp of vanity and deceitfulness and war and to finally deliver us safely into the paradise of God.

That is the illogical, incomprehensible truth which Paul calls "the foolishness of God" and which exceeds the reach of human reason.

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Of all the sins that plague mankind, the rejection of this “foolishness of the cross”—God’s wisdom—is the greatest.

It is called “intellectual pride” and it was born in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve tried to know what God knows rather than to do what God told them to do.

Ever since that time men have demanded that God justify His ways in our eyes rather than that it is we who need to be justified in His eyes.

You can base your hopes for safety and happiness on many different things in this world.

On your financial security, on your intellectual understanding, on your accomplishments, on your family and friends, on your career, on your pursuit of pleasure.

But sooner or later, every one of these idols will fail you.

In the end, there is only one place you can place your hopes that will never disappoint you and that is in the infant of Bethlehem.

Cling to this infant and He will carry you to heaven.

I wish you all a blessed Christmas!

Amen.

