

*"Let the children come to me, so not try to stop them; for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you, whoever does not accept the Kingdom of God like a child, will never enter it."*

It's not uncommon to hear that children are the church of the future. They may be the adults of the future, but they should very much be part of the church of the present.

Look around our congregation and see the number of grey heads. We're all getting older and will inevitably shrink in numbers without the introduction of younger members. And this is true of many congregations.

What is the key? I'm sorry to have to tell you that if we want to see children in church it's the example and encouragement of adults and especially parents and grandparents which will help in this.

Children are watching and listening all the time. Much of what they learn, their attitudes and their approach to life, is absorbed from their parents, often unconsciously. The unspoken habits, prejudices and behavior of parents in particular are powerful in shaping a child's view of what is important in life – probably far more influential than what they are actually told. Remember the old saying: "Don't do what I do, do what I say!". Example is all.

How often do you see a parent out cycling with a child, the latter wearing a crash helmet but not the parent. Or parents who send their children to Sunday School but seldom, if ever, go to church themselves. What is this saying to a child? I can remember my mother turning to me one day in church and saying: "This is not my faith, you know; but you've been Baptised and it's important that you are part of the church".

Many parents still bring their children to Baptism, and the introduction to the service reminds them that it is their example and encouragement which is fundamental if the Baptism is to mean anything lasting. For many, this will be the last time they enter a church until the next Baptism or for one of the other Occasional Offices. This is

something we need to think and pray carefully about. (I'd add to this that we need to do the same with our approach to 20 and 30 year olds>)

Some parents still make the excuse that they want their children to make up their own minds about faith. How a child can be expected to decide about something of which it knows virtually nothing I have never understood. By ignoring the spiritual area of life children are being deprived of a most important aspect of what it means to be human. No wonder there's a poverty of spirit in modern life. An indication of this is the vote in the States this past week to approve of Sunday Trading.

The importance of example is particularly true in the early years of a child's life. It is then that they learn about the world and how to respond to it; and about love and relationships. Perhaps the key is for adults to become more like children in their own spirituality, for Jesus warned that unless we accept the Kingdom of God like a child, we shall never enter it.

So what is it about children that we need to emulate? Firstly, wonder. Children have a fantastic capacity for wonder, not surprising because so much is new and exciting. As we grow older we seem to lose this sense of wonder and can so easily become bored and cynical. But isn't wonder akin to worship? If we can only open our eyes and look at the world about us and see again what a fantastic place it is, our own sense of worship will be immeasurably improved. Children will see this sense of excitement in us and respond to it.

A father and his 5 year old son David were planting raspberries when a neighbor joined them for a few minutes. The boy pointed to the ground and said: "Look daddy; what's that?" His father looked and replied: "It's a beetle." The boy was clearly impressed by this colourful creature. The neighbor stepped on it and said: "That'll deal with that!" The boy looked to his father for an explanation, for a reason why the man had killed the beetle. That night, the boy said: "Daddy, I liked that beetle." And his father replied: "I did, too."

The second thing about children is their trust. They have never learned to mistrust. They will quite happily wander up to a stranger and start to tell them the thing that is uppermost in their minds. Adults, on the other hand, so often find conversation with a stranger difficult and talk about the weather and other inconsequential things. Yes, these

days it is necessary to warn children about strangers, yet they do have an implicit trust in the adults about them. One of our problems today is that trust has been replaced with suspicion and we need to redress the balance.

Thirdly, children are inherently humble. They are not frightened to ask if they don't know something. They are not ashamed to confess their ignorance, and delight in new discoveries. Too many adults, on the other hand, have given up learning about our world and cover up their ignorance. Life for all of us is a journey of discovery and particularly as we treat the path of faith. If we can only be like children, keen to explore and to learn, many lives would be transformed.

The last thing about children is that they have a short memory and do not hold grudges, unlike most adults.

Here are two stories:

A family went out for an evening meal. Menus were passed round, including one to eight-year-old Mollie. The adults were deep in conversation and ignored the girl. When the waiter came to take the order, he came to Mollie last and asked what she'd like. "A hot-dog and lemonade," she replied. "No!" said her grandmother, "she'll have the roast chicken." "And milk to drink," added her mother. "Would you like ketchup on your hot-dog?" asked the waiter as he walked away, to the surprise of the family. "Ketchup," said Mollie. Then she turned to her family and said: "You know what? He thinks I'm real!"

A bus got stuck under a bridge. The traffic was backed up and all attempts to move the bus failed. Sitting nearby was a group of boys. After a while, one boy called out to the company official: "Do you want to know how to move the bus?" The official replied: "All I need now is a know-all smart-arse. I don't need your advice, thank you." Unabashed, the boy replied: "Just let the air out of the tyres, mister." The official looked at the boy and then smiled and proceeded to let down the tyres and the bus was released. And in his heart he knew that some air had been let out of his own tyres.

I'll give the last word to Socrates: "Why do you turn and scrape every stone to gather wealth and take so little care of your children to whom one day you must relinquish all?"

