

Proper 17

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 3:13-17 & 19:13-15

Above the Cradle Roll in the church where I was raised, are inscribed the words: “Suffer the little children to come unto me”. I would pass this every Sunday on my way from the church sanctuary to the Sunday School room and I would always wonder what it meant. There was Jesus, blond and bearded, sitting in a beautiful green, Irish pastoral setting, with three or four young children standing beside him or sitting on his knee. And I could not understand what suffering had to do with all of this and I was too

embarrassed to ask anyone. Of course “suffer” in its older, archaic form, can mean, “allow” or “permit”, but I didn’t know that, and the whole thing, (rustic, Irish setting and all), just didn’t make any sense.

It is interesting that Jesus encouraged the disciples to bring the little children to him. And more than that, he then told the disciples that these little children were to be their inspiration and their model when they were asking themselves the question: what is living in the Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven all about? “Suffer the little children”; allow the little children and learn. So often within our church experience, Christianity has been presented as a

challenge to the mind. We are encouraged to wrestle with truths: to break down arguments and analyse and reconstruct etc. But what do we have here? We have young children without the capacity to ask the questions, without a knowledge that there are even questions in the first place, being welcomed and affirmed by Jesus exactly the way they are. This little cameo from the Gospels, on its own, gives us permission to have a service like this in the name of Jesus. Baptism aside, the presence of water aside; allow little Matthew to come to me, Jesus says. And as he placed his hands of blessing on the young children of old, so we believe by faith that he places his hands of

blessing on Matthew. And we share in joy this morning.

The account of Jesus' baptism in Matthew's Gospel has stretched the minds of scholars and preachers through the years. Much analysis and intellectual wrestling has taken place over this text as it has over the whole subject of baptism in general. And yet the passage about the children seems to me to speak into this situation. The young children came to Jesus without the analysis and the reasoning. They came because they are drawn to him and he welcomed them. John the Baptist tried to argue with Jesus, and Jesus gently directed him to give way: stop, take your hands of control

off, and let it happen. Jesus didn't even begin to debate with John; not now, John, let's suffer the Father, let's allow the Father to do his will. And the most amazing event occurred as heaven moved in a remarkable way to earth. All the sacraments are like that. They are the action, the movement of God towards us. The initiative lies with God. That is the case with Holy Communion and it is the case with Holy Baptism too. Without God's initiative there is nothing. And that fact is the single most important element in baptism. God initiates it and God seals it by his Spirit. The Spirit of God is active in baptism and it is the same Spirit that was active in the little children who received the

blessing of Christ's hands on their heads. Without God's Spirit sealing and enabling and bringing to memory and action the results of what will happen in a few moments time when Matthew is baptised, there is no benefit, there is no transformation. We are entirely reliant on God. Robert and Louise will make promises this morning for Matthew and all of you will be invited to make promises for Matthew, if you feel you are able. But all of our responses are but secondary and derivative of the supreme grace of God the Father, demonstrated in his Son and sealed by his Spirit. Amen.