

Reading: Mark 10:2-16

It's wonderful to be welcoming Alaska and Wolf into the family of God through their baptism today.

It's also Margaret's first baptism. I didn't want to unnerve and tell her about Bruce Williams, one of the church family, being baptised. Bruce was meant to be Richard, but the Vicar got it in on his head that he was a Bruce. So, Bruce he has been ever since.

Baptism is an important milestone. A milestone of realising just how much we are loved and cherished by God. It's a journey that begins with baptism but continues throughout our whole life.

In the gospel Jesus wants the children to come to him. It's not hard to imagine the scene: the disciples are embarrassed by the children and their parents harassing Jesus for a blessing. They want to send the children away. Maybe they thought it was beneath Jesus' dignity, or maybe they are conscious of the threats hanging over him.

A friend of mine was the Roman Catholic priest in a neighbouring parish. He was approached by a group of concerned parishioners, "The children" they said, "are making too much noise in church. They are running around not showing any respect. We need special place to put them Father." What they had in mind was a soundproof booth out the back. "I have a special place for them," he said, "follow me." The church was in the shape of a circle. Taking them to the very center of the circle he said, "Here is the special place for the children." Much like the disciples those parishioners went away grumpy that day.

Jesus, like my friend, never lets a teachable moment go by. I like to think he was holding a child in his arms when he taught the disciples and us two things. Firstly "To such as these," he says, "belongs the kingdom of God."

"Such as these" is a catch phrase for all who are in a childlike position: the weak, the vulnerable, the unnoticed, the little ones.

Christians are at their best when we are accepting and welcoming of "such as these". In one congregation we had a man with Down Syndrome. He was lovely. He took it upon himself to be the verger. He had a black gown and lead people around the church during worship. Often in the notices he would get up and give a long speech that no one could understand. But what made me most proud was the way the congregation responded. They listened carefully and clapped when he had finished talking.

Secondly Jesus teaches that in order to enter God's reign we need to become like little children. Rather than us teaching the children, the children have much to teach us.

A child is dependent and knows it. The love and care that Alaska and Wolf receive from their family is not earned or worked for. They are cared for simply because they are loved. God doesn't care for us because we are successful or powerful or good looking or productive. God cares for us simply because God is good. We don't have to earn God's love: it is simply a gift - it is grace.

The journey that we all must take is one of growing into the knowledge of God's love for us. As we journey through life, we all need times to be reminded of that love. The knocks and the hurts which life gives us can unseat that foundational belief that we are cherished by God. But God will always be reminding us of that love. Many of us by the time we have reached adulthood have so much negative talk in our heads that it can be hard for God's love to get in. And yet God still reaches out to us.

Dorothy tells the story of one such life-giving encounter:

"I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate and when I started school everyone teased me. I had garbled speech – even blowing up a balloon was more than I could do. When I tried to drink from the water fountain it spilled out my nose. By the age of 7 I had convinced myself that no one would ever love me, or even like me. And then I entered Mrs. Leonard's class. I never knew her first name – she was round and pretty and smelt good and we all loved her. The time came for the hearing tests. I was barely able to hear anything out of one ear, but I was not about to let anyone find out. So, I cheated. I learned to watch the other kids. They did what was called the whisper test. Each kid went to the door of the classroom, turned sideways, and put a finger in the other ear so as to block the sound. Then the teacher would whisper something, and the child repeated it back. I discovered that they never checked how tight you put your finger in your ear, so I would hold it so I could still hear. The teacher would say things like, "The sky is blue." "Do you have new shoes?" My turn came. I turned my bad ear to her and pretended to plug the other. I waited and then the words came that God had surely put in her mouth, seven words that changed my life forever. Mrs. Leonard my round pretty fragrant teacher whom I adored said softly, "I wish you were my little girl." "I wish you were my little girl."

Today God is saying to Wolf and Alaska you are my little child. You are loved and cherished. You are the apple of my eye. Nothing can or will ever happen that can change that. But what's true of Wolf and Alaska is also true of each of us.

We are God's beloved children, and the spiritual life is growing into the realisation of that love.

My prayer for everyone gathered here and online is simple. It is the same prayer Paul had for the church in Ephesus: "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love for you in Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."