

Sermon for Trinity 7

by David Wilbourne

Being Childish

The vicarage, like many others,

was sited next to the graveyard.

From her bedroom window,

the vicar's toddler daughter spied on her daddy

taking funeral after funeral.

'Mummy' she eventually asked,

'Why does daddy keep planting old ladies in our garden?'

Children see things differently from adults,

refreshingly, challengingly, incisively.

All those children's letters to God

that take bookshops by storm from time to time.

Like:

'Dear God, are boys better than girls?

I know you are one, but do try to be fair.'

or

'Dear God,

my teacher says the north pole is not really at the top.

Did you make any other mistakes?'

'Dear God,

Did you mean for a rhinoceros to look like that,

or was it an accident?'

'Dear God,

Where do babies come from?

I hope you can explain it better than my father!'

And finally,

'Dear God,

Church is alright,

but you could sure use some better music.

I hope this does not hurt your feelings.'

I thought of that last one

when we were sitting behind a pillar
at Ben's ordination in the Minster last week.

In front of us were two teenage boys,
who were clearly not used to church,
but nevertheless had come to the 2 ¼ hour service
to faithfully support a friend or relation.

They sat when they should have stood,
they talked when they should have been silent,
they were silent when they should have sung.

A service which clearly was sheer thrill for some
was equally clearly very boring for them,
and that worried me.

With those others who were being ordained,
Ben was encouraged to seek out those
in the forgotten corners of the world.

And these lads clearly were in that category,
a forgotten corner of the Minster.

Jesus talks about God revealing to infants
what he hides from adults,
but this seems the opposite of that:
what was being communicated to adults
was being hidden from these lads.

That troubled me.

It should trouble you.

And I think we should do something about it.

Because those lads and millions like them
are the future of God's world.

And these lads and millions like them
are God's children as much as we are.

But what can we do?

I remember when David Hope

in his first year as Archbishop

gave a talk to local church people

in Norton-on-Derwent Church Hall.

The meeting was besieged by local lads who gathered

outside

and shouted things that naughty teenage boys tend to

shout.

'These are the very people we should be reaching,'

the Archbishop told his elderly, mostly blue-haired audience,

'Let's bring them in.'

And they were duly brought in,

and offered over-diluted orange juice and limp custard
creams,

and looked bemused as everyone tried to be nice to them.

It was a strange meeting,

or rather a strange non-meeting.

But what can we do?

I have tried.

I have tried to build bridges in your name.

Chair of Governors,

Assembly-taker –

taking assembly at a Comp

is the closest thing to a near-death experience

you'll ever encounter –

curriculum deviser.

I have tried my utmost to support those who work with

children,

I like teachers,
in fact I like them so much I married one -
greater love hath no man than this! –
but I've observed that most teachers eventually
fall into
a them-and-us mentality,
one which I can fully understand
but cannot condone.
In a them-and-us mentality
they are cast
as a different and,
by inference, lesser species,
to be controlled and suppressed
by us.
It happens to everyone in their career,
clergy who've put in the years can find their faith go cold,

can despise the very people of God they have charge over.
No doubt many doctors grow to despise their patients,
many shopkeepers their customers.
A natural process of disillusion.
But something which needs to be countered
for everybody's sake
if life in all its fullness is to blossom.
We're told in Mark's Gospel
that when Jesus encountered
a wealthy teenager
who just couldn't let go of his possessions,
that Jesus simply looked upon him and loved him.
No doubt he would be censured by the Archbishop of
Nigeria
if he did that today,
although I do not think it is for us to censure our Lord.

Nor, to break away from our theme for a moment,
is it for us to censure the Archbishop of Canterbury,
who's the next best thing to our Lord
we'll ever encounter in this life!

But those two lads in the Minster last Sunday,
I looked upon them and loved them,
as I look upon my hostile audience in school assemblies
and love them.

I felt for those lads,
clearly bored,
because to be honest I'm often bored by church,
which can seem a terribly long way
from the God of life and fun.

And we do do some weird things in church,
and having a couple of teenage lads present

can healthily bring us up short.

We owe it to teenage lads or lasses,
present or absent,
to make sure that we are real
before ourselves and them.

How we communicate through our hymns and liturgy,
sermons and prayers
is critical,
and we should be critical about it.

If it sounds pretentious,
then we should scrap it and recast it.

Sometimes hymn writers and prayer writers
seem to have had

what I choose to call
a 1960s by-pass,

and seem to be blind to innuendo and double entendre

and to be honest sheer naffness.

‘Mary, hail, though afraid,
in her womb God is laid.’

We need to run our stuff past a teenage boy,
real or mythical,
simply to do a reality check.

And those kids sitting before me in assembly
looking fierce.

I feel so sorry for them,
barked at by teachers,
herded together like cattle,
almost made to feel inferior for simply being.

Usually I end up being gently subversive
and mocking those who mock children,
encouraging a gentler, more sympathetic approach.

I’ve quoted before the moment in Dennis Potter’s play
the Son of Man

where Christ, having been beaten and humiliated
is brought before Pilate,
personification of Rome in all its brutal force.

As the blindfold is torn from his face,
it is Christ who looks into Pilate’s eyes and says,

‘There’s no need to be frightened.’

‘There’s no need to be frightened,’
is what I want to say to teenagers.

We adults always claim that
one’s schooldays are the best days of your life,
yet there is a lot of terror,
a lot of fear swirling around in childhood,
fear of the future,
the sheer terror of existence,

and children deserve to be treated tenderly in Christ's name.

A Church which says to teenagers,

'Wait until you're an adult,

then all this will make sense,'

is, I fear, missing a trick,

and I doubly fear, missing the God in Christ

who reveals himself to infants.

As I say,

I've struggled to communicate with youngsters all my

ministry,

as no doubt you have struggled.

My book,

A Virgin's Diary

was an attempt to give Mary a teenage voice,

bright, feisty, sexy, with attitude.

I wrote not necessarily to communicate with teenagers,

but to communicate the teenage mindset to adults

and shock us as to the gulf between them and churchy us.

The book certainly shocked,

but having realised the gulf

what do we do about it?

Talking to youngsters not as inferiors

but as equals isn't a bad start.

Often the sweetest moments at Helmsley School

is when I sit with the Year Sixes before assembly

and chat.

You could say getting down to their level,

or you could say rising to their level.

Talking and listening is probably a good starting point.

We talk to the strangest of adults

when we bump into them in town;

why not the strangest of children?

And the other good starting point

is recognising the child in each one of us,

buried beneath our adult veneer for so long.

A sense of fun, inquisitiveness, cheekiness, liveliness.

Sometimes the child breaks through in funny ways,

and we behave childishly,

like those groups who perversely spurned John and Jesus.

But more often we can let the child break through

our adult deadness in marvellous ways,

and at those times we can run with joy towards Christ's

kingdom.

To end with a prayer by Michel Quoist:

God says I like youngsters, I want people to be like them.

I don't like old people unless they are still children.

I only want children in my kingdom:

this has been decreed from the beginning of time.

Youngsters – twisted, humped, wrinkled, white-bearded –

all kinds of youngsters, but youngsters...

But above all I like youngsters because of the look in their eyes.

In their eyes I can read their age.

In my heaven, there will only be five-year-old eyes,

for I know of nothing more beautiful

than the pure eyes of a child...'

And that's our prayer,

'Lord, give me the pure eyes of a child.'

For only then,

in being attentive to the pure eyes of the children we

encounter,

and yearning for pure child-like eyes for ourselves,

will we truly find rest for our souls,

will our yoke be easy,

and our burden light.