

*The last time I was a visiting preacher, as I climbed into the pulpit, this little fellow of about 3 came clattering down the aisle, chuntering as 3-year olds do. Everyone's attention immediately fell on the child. And I made some throw-away remark about the little guy making a bid to deliver the sermon in my place. And then Mum came and scooped him up and carted him off.*

*I called this to mind, thinking about Jesus directing the disciples' attention to a little child. And placing him or her at the centre. In order to teach them a lesson.*

*It was in his day quite a shocking thing to do. Children were mostly kept out of sight and hearing of adult, especially male, company. The status of a child was extremely low. Not quite slave level, but not far off.*

*We perhaps find that shocking. Thinking ourselves much more enlightened these days as far as valuing and caring for children are concerned.*

*But, you know, we're not always that brilliant with children, even in this day and age. Not every congregation welcomes the presence of children in church during services. Not every parent or carer is willing to keep the child as the centre of their attention. You've seen it yourself, adults ignoring the child they're with because they're talking on their phone, or texting, or whatever. And then they wonder why the child lags behind or kicks up a fuss.*

*What children want, and need, is attention. This is how they learn, by being engaged with the world around them. This is how they learn their own value. And that they don't have to misbehave for adults to pay them attention. And that it's not all about money – unlike the little girl I was talking to on Friday, as she desperately tried to pull out a wobbly tooth, on the basis that last time one of her teeth fell out, the tooth fairy left £15 under her pillow.*

*But child care isn't just about individual parenting. It's about the way we organise things as a society. A society where work, and material gain, seem to come before the building of relationships. A society where around 4m children are living in poverty, 120,000 in temporary housing and even more in overcrowded or poor quality homes, and 1 in 6 are obese. A society that over-protects children in some ways and in other ways fails to keep them safe from harmful images and ideas on TV and social media. A society in which there are record numbers of children and young people suffering from bullying, low self-esteem, stress and mental health difficulties.*

*So, by putting the child among the disciples, in the centre, it's as if Jesus is saying, put the child at the centre of your attention, of your practice, of your policy making.*

*Jesus then underlines that by saying something truly extraordinary. He says, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.'*

*In other words, in the child we meet Jesus. And in the child we see the face of God. Which is the most remarkable way of saying how precious the child is. How precious human life and human relationship is. To welcome a child is to welcome God. And how we treat a child is a mark of the way we treat God.*

*(God doesn't get the attention he deserves in our society either, but staying with the child thing for just a moment longer) it was the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, some time ago who pointed out that the*

*underlying issue in relation to the care and nurture of children is that too many adults (perhaps in a sense the culture as a whole) act like children.*

*We want things. We want our own way. We want to play. We misbehave. We argue and fall out – just like children in the playground. Just like politicians and commentators arguing about Brexit, for example – no serious and respectful debate – just like children in the playground.*

*But actually, being or becoming an adult is something about controlling our desires. Something about recognising that we are not the centre of the universe. About setting aside our own needs, and acting responsibly towards others. This the wisdom that James is talking about in his letter. Not a way of life driven by selfish ambition, and envy and desire for things and the seeking after pleasure, but life founded, as it were, on the wisdom that comes from above.*

*When Jesus took that child and placed it in the midst and said what he said, what had prompted him was that the disciples had been arguing on the way which one of them was the greatest. After all he had said to them and shown them, they still don't get it. In the way that in some ways we still don't get it. That life is not about what you do for yourself, what you achieve for yourself. Not about acting as if we were self-made creatures. Neither is it about negligence, or childishness.*

*It is about learning to find oneself in the service of others. It is about growing into responsibility for those least able to look after themselves – the child, and all whom the child represents – the needy, the weak, the vulnerable. It is about a kingdom where the first put themselves last, and the least become the first to be considered. It is about finding God in those who draw out kindness and care and compassion – who draw out love – from us.*

*On balance, this is not to idolise children (they are not always little angels), neither to deny that even as adults that there are times (especially in our times of illness and uncertainty) when we are dependent on the help and care of others. But it is to say that we are made for one another. And that we are called under Jesus' example to give up concern for ourselves, and to give of ourselves as fully as we can, as servants of one another.*

*Which we do when we refuse to join the gravy train of the acquisitive society, when we support our homeless shelter and food banks and debt centre, and when we simply sit and give our closest attention to another human being, perhaps especially the children in our midst.*