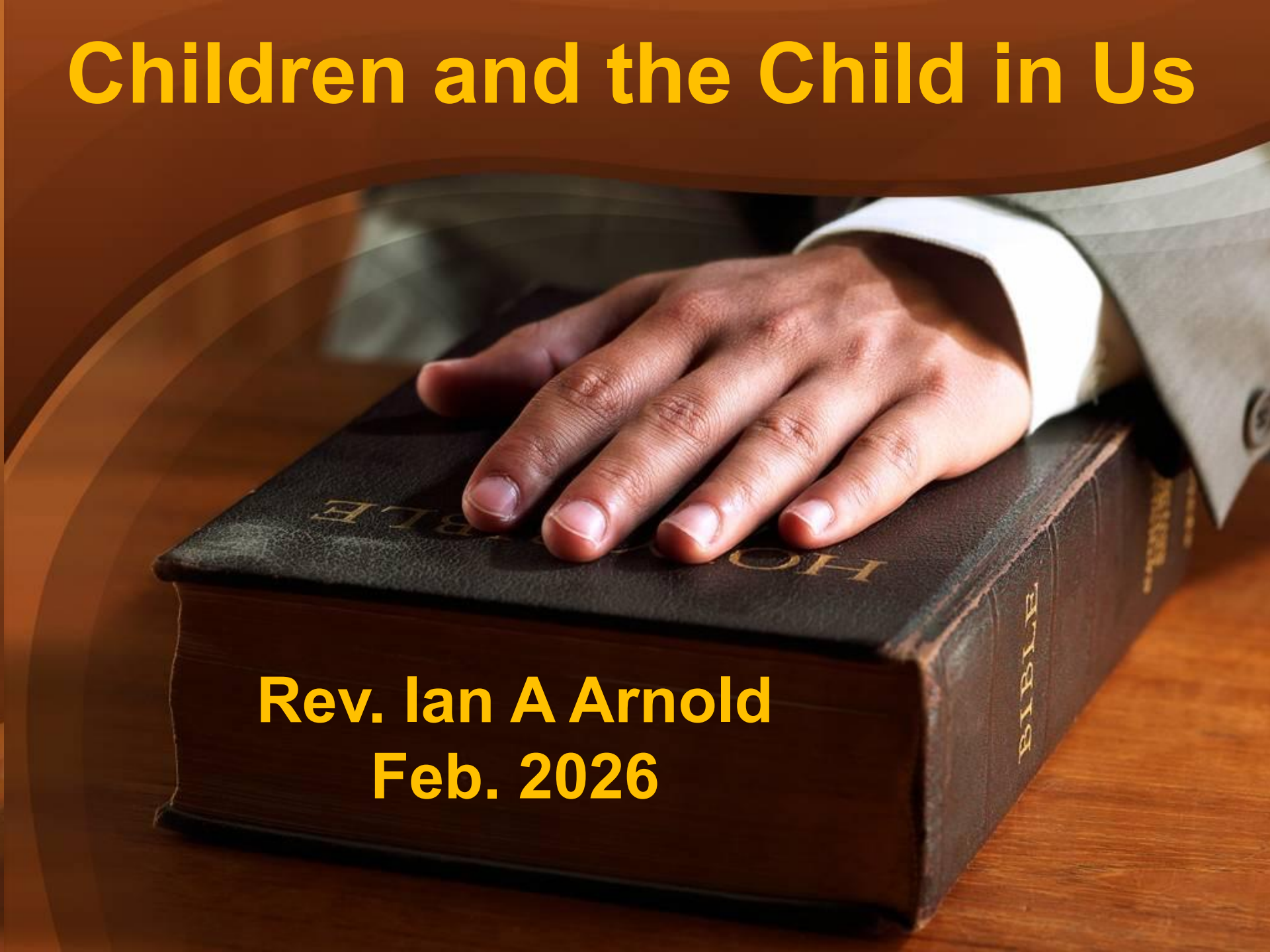
Children and the Child in Us



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Please read beforehand:

Isaiah Chapter 11, verse 6: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them." (Emphasis mine)

Attitudes to children in New Testament times

Whilst the evidence is scarce, there are several outstanding studies available over the internet about attitudes to children, and where they ranked in Society, in New Testament times.

Now, we might imagine that Jewish culture, and attitudes, would be different from the prevailing, and intertwined, Greek and Roman cultures. After all, there are some lovely, affirming, teachings about children in the Old Testament. Few of these - if any - are more eloquent than what we find in Psalms 127 and 128.

In Psalm 127 there is a memorable teaching which asserts,

"Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord" . And from Psalm 128 and children are described as being "like olive plants around your table." (Psalm 128:3)

But times change, and based on what evidence that has come to light, by the time of Jesus Jewish attitudes - on the whole -were very much in keeping with the dominant gentile low estimation of where children fitted in society." People really didn't care about childhood or had sympathy for children in those days." (See https://www.newcoventantway.com>post>children>in)

For sure, there were exceptions. We know of such instances from the Gospels, as for example the story of Jarius and his anguish over the possible death of his little daughter (See Mark 5:21-42); and, similarly, the distress of the father of the epileptic boy. (See Mark 9:14-29). But these were exceptions. Roman law gave the father absolute power over his family, which extended to life and death. (See https://org2023?05/1515-thihgs-Jesus-said-about-children-and-what-they-mean-for-us). And it wasn't at all unusual for a father to exercise this power, especially with regard to unwanted new born babies.

It is no wonder then that when, on a particular occasion, mothers brought their children to Jesus, to bless them, His disciples –reflecting, at least to some extent, the prevailing mindset – were all for dismissing them and for not allowing them even to come near Him. It reflected what they considered to be their value and worth. They (children) could never be His priority or deserve His special attention.

But – and as we know – Jesus would have none of this and, startled as they – the disciples – must have been, He overruled them.

What followed is one of the most defining and enduring images we have of the Lord, welcoming and blessing little children and, importantly, highlighting qualities they possess that everyone, in fact, could do well with emulating.

“Let the little children come to me”, He said, “and do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 19:14

We can be certain that Jesus’ disciples, the mothers of the children, and other onlookers wouldn’t at first have been able to believe what they were hearing. And it is an episode the influence of which on attitudes to children, down through the generations and centuries since, is simply incalculable.

But to go back several and more centuries

As we have already noted, it was not always that way in Old Testament Jewish culture. And these words from Isaiah which we have already heard this morning,from Isaiah, testify to this.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together. And a little child shall lead them."

It says so much that the Hebrew word which is translated here as 'little child' suggests affection and tenderness and a good feeling, such as endorses a more compassionate regard for children in much earlier times.

The picture painted

As for Isaiah Chapter 11, the picture painted here is one of peace and serenity, and of a little child doing remarkable and unexpected things, exercising a central influence over the situation and calming and taming what would otherwise be threatening and destructive. It is a child leading and taking things into places not known or visited before.

Children taking us into places not known or visited before

What a thought this is! **Children taking us into places not known or visited before!**

But this is exactly what they do for us today and do for those around them.

This is what the Lord would have children do – take us into places we have not known or visited before. There is no doubt whatsoever that children, take their parents; take their grandparents; and take all who have anything to do with them; take the stranger in the street or in the Shopping Centre… into places – or states – not known or visited before.

The thing is, aware- as at times we cannot be – of the demands of parenting and what it asks for from us, such as,

- the care children need;
- the vigilance we have to exercise;
- the patience we need
- the broken,
  sometimes sleepless,
  nights we go through;
  and so on,

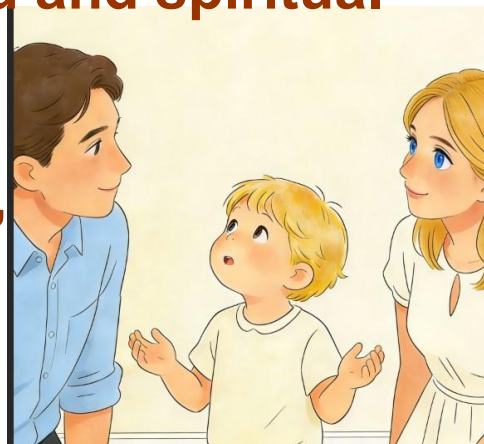
The reality is that our relationship with children is much more of a two-way street than we stop to take in and appreciate. We do things for them, for sure. Here in Australia, and not so long ago it was quite usual to see a sticker on the back bumper bars of cars which read, “Mum’s taxi”! And in its way this speaks volumes about the demands having children make on parents. in a way the words on this sticker said it all. We know how it is! There are the sacrifices, yes. There are the soiled clothes we had dressed in and which we thought we would look so good in, yes. There are the outings that don’t go as we planned, yes, or that we are not able to go out at all! All of these are experiences every parent has.

Yet at the same time children, unconscious as they are of it, do good and wonderful and positive things for us – leading and taking us into places, or states, and into an awareness of things, not known, guessed or visited by us before.

Saving us from ourselves

This is for sure; children take us out of ourselves. They head us off from becoming self-absorbed. They challenge us mightily to develop patience and compassion. They awaken us to the value of simple things and simple pleasures. They lead us into a renewed sense of the wonders of the world around us. They take us into their world of guilelessness, honesty and transparency which, as adults, we are so adept at side-stepping or have lost touch with. They upend our priorities. They have no image of themselves of which they are conscious and which they are pursuing. And isn't it wonderful, too, the way they lead their parents to re-think God and spiritual things?

- "Who made me, daddy?"
- "Who made the world, Mummy?"
- "Where did Grandpa go when he died?"



And it is not that they always have to actually ask the questions!

I have seen the parents of new-born babies - young Dads and Mums, -who hadn't given much thought to it previously, but now overwhelmed with the miracle of the new arrival.

And here they are, their thoughts being opened up to the Lord having been involved in the process after all. Within minutes of arriving in the world, a little one is already leading them.

Tough – but a privilege

I once received a Fathers Day card and across the front of it in large letters was written words about parenting being “a tough job”! (I’m glad that this son who sent it, a parent himself, knows it to be so!)

But let’s not over emphasize this side of things. We give out, but receive so much in return; benefiting in incredible ways and, like we’ve noted, are brought to changes in ourselves and to the development of qualities that are to our eternal benefit. So very much more than we really know children are an instrument in the Lord’s hands through which He leads us to heavenly things and heavenly life. They are not, of course, solely such an instrument in the Lord’s hands, but without question they are one of the most powerful.

And there is this, as well: the key, pivotal, influence on our children that as parents are privileged to have.

The thing is, our children arrive in this world with wonderful potential, neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically evil; and the type of person they become as adults all lies ahead of them and will be the result of choices they then consciously make.

They, like us, are receptors of influences that, on the one hand, awaken selflessness and consideration of others and, on the other hand, influences that awaken selfishness and mean-mindedness.

As adults, we are continuously challenged to choose between these influences.

As for children, they need help, guidance, direction and support to manage these opposites in whatever way they come at them, from within or from without.

All relationships

All relationships need to be regarded in this way, in terms of the way we stand to benefit immeasurably and spiritually benefit from giving what a good and healthy relationship requires of us.

Think of marriage. A good marriage requires much giving, sacrifice, and attention to the needs of the other partner. Invariably there are times when patience and self-control is required and even hard to have. Such is my observation that even in the best marriages there are times of exasperation with each other and thoughts creep in about being better off without the other.

In the early years of a marriage, especially, there can be awkwardness in the relationship as each partner gets accustomed to the other. But partners become better people in the working through of these adjustments and even disappointments with each other.

There is a natural tendency we all have to over focus on what life, or situations, or relationships, ask of us instead of focusing on so much we receive.

Children in the world and the child in us.

To come back to children: If, in a survey, people are asked what it is that most draws them to children, the answer, almost always, is **their innocence**.

Infants and very young children (and please note my stress on the very young!)

- **love and trust their parents**: it's where their security lies. (Try taking a children away from a parent, for a moment or for an overnight stay and we soon learn how important that security is).
- They fall in with family plans and **don't as yet read the world through the prism of self**.
- They **have no sense of self image**; of what they look like in the estimation of others; and impressing others doesn't cross their minds.
- They **live in the moment**. Yesterday and tomorrow are too big for them to get their minds around. It's only "now" that matters.

"Infants and little children are governed, more so than adults, by celestial things because of the presence in them of love towards their parents and of love for one another, as well as of innocence." ("Arcana Caelestia" `453)

Equally beautiful is,

"During the time from earliest infancy through to early childhood a person is led by the Lord into heaven; indeed little children are placed among celestial angels who serve to keep them in a state of innocence." ("Arcana Caelestia" 5342:2)

Because of this, in the Bible children infants are a symbol of - or

correspond to –

the child in us.

- The child in us is our trust in God and the sense of security we can enjoy in our relationship with Him.
- The child in us is our increasing ability to live in the moment; not raking over the past or stressing about the future.
- The child in us is to let go of image and our anxiety about the impression we are making.
- The child in us is our deference to the Lord; to His ways; to His standards and His values.

THIS is innocence. THIS is the child in us. THIS is what it means to be led by the Lord.

And it is this child in us; this innocence; that renders harmless those things so capable of spiritually destroying us – all held up to us here, similarly symbolically, as the wolf, the leopard and the young lion.

These wild animals are the criticisms and the complaints; the doubts and the fears; the anger and the contempt; the envy and the pride; the disappointments and the set-backs, which lurk in our as yet unregenerate natures.

And the child in us is what neutralizes them and controls and leads them.

And what is innocence, which a child symbolizes?

In the words of the teaching of the Writings it is, simply, "a willingness to be led by the Lord". ("Heaven and Hell"279)

May all our dealings with children contribute to the growth and strengthening of what in teenage years and adulthood will be the child in them so that they come to know peace and harmony – as we can – and receive into their lives the blessings of heaven.

Assuredly, I say to you, (Jesus said),unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3)

And so back to Isaiah:

“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.

Amen

Readings:

Matthew Chapter 18: verses 1 to 6
Matthew Chapter 19:13-15
Zechariah 8: 1 to 5

Arcana Caelestia 10134:2

"The reasons why the removal of evils, and the implantation of goodness and truth and the joining together of these, is accomplished by means of the good of innocence from the Lord is that all good, if it is to be good, must have innocence within it. Without it good is not good, for innocence is not only the ground in which truths are sown but also the very essence of good. Therefore how far a person possesses innocence determines how far his good becomes good and his truth has life from good, consequently how far he is endowed with life and the evils present with him are removed."

Heaven and Hell 341

"Innocence is the receptacle of all things of heaven."

THE END