

## **'Let the little ones come...' – Worshipping with children**

What a joy it is to have met so many young families around Bethlehem in my first few months here! Of course I give thanks for every member of our congregation whether old or young, married or single, new-comer or long-timer. But it seems to me there is something particularly encouraging for all of us to see young families around, especially together in worship.

Having said this, the other thing we can say for sure is that it is just plain hard work to be in worship with little kids. They wriggle, they whine, they squawk and they shriek - for young families to be together in worship can be very, very difficult.

So the purpose of this article is simply to offer a few words of encouragement to families with young kids about being in worship. It also applies to grandparents, and to all of us in so far as we want to heed Jesus encouragement to 'let the little children come to me'. The following are just a few simple thoughts from my own family's experience, and from the many stories and reflections others have shared with me.

The first point is simply to say, *'hang in there and don't give up. It's hard, but it's worth it'*. Most of the really important things in life are hard aren't they? It's hard work getting our kids through doctor's appointments and a myriad of other things. But we do it because it's important. Growing in a relationship with God and the habit of regular worship is infinitely more so. Please know that everyone in church is for you and on your side. Perhaps you've had an experience along the way where it hasn't felt like it, but trust me, we all want you and the kids to be there. Most of the older folk have been through it themselves and know the struggle. Please be encouraged to persevere in worshipping with your kids.

My second comment is to point out a mysterious law of nature about children's noise and behaviour. This law is that parents seem to hear and experience their own child's cries and tantrums to approximately ten times the intensity that everyone else does! In other words, they're not usually as bad as you think. That's not at all to say we should let them run wild and forget about discipline. But I've heard parent after parent apologising to another person for their child, and the other person has, honestly I think, told them they hardly noticed.

The third encouragement I'd offer is to make use of the *visuals* in church. Bethlehem is an especially good church building for this. Kids love visual things and can be very observant. One day in Brisbane I took the 5 year old Childcare kids into the church and got them to sit in the front pew, look around and ask questions and make comments. We went on and on. There was so much to see and they became engaged very quickly. Of course in a service this can be difficult as we don't always want to be explaining everything the whole way through! But it might be something like a little challenge before the sermon, 'count how many crosses you can find in the church', or 'write me a little story about the pictures you see up in the special windows at the front'.

My next point may be surprising and even a little counter-intuitive, which is that I'd encourage you to *embrace the liturgy*, to learn it and teach it to your kids. When worshipping with little kids the liturgy is your friend, and for two reasons.

Firstly, for you as parents. For parents of young kids the worship service can easily become one big blur. You simply don't have the same ability and luxury to concentrate and focus like others do. Who can hold a hymnbook or bulletin when you've got a child hanging off each arm! However, this is where the regular order, the rhythm and flow of the worship service that we call 'the liturgy', is your friend. Because when you are in tune with the ebbs and flows of confession and forgiveness, prayer

and praise, hearing and speaking, receiving and giving thanks, it's possible to still be involved and participating in worship while at the same time dealing with the 101 distractions kids provide. For more on this I'd encourage you to read the perspective of a mother of young children who says it better and more personally than I can - <http://katieluthersisters.org/2015/11/gift-of-the-liturgy-for-those-with-toddlers/>.

It's also for the kids themselves though. I think most of us would agree that kids generally find security and thrive within good order and routine. If they too can be helped to grow into the rhythm of the liturgical worship service, it can be a great blessing for them and keep them more engaged. So often we don't give our little ones enough credit do we? How many parents have heard their kids at home 'playing church', including reciting various parts of the service, sometimes even to the right tunes! Kids are capable of picking up far more than we often think, and so they can be actively involved in the service earlier than we'd expect. Try just starting with something simple like teaching kids the 'Lord have mercy' after Saturday night dinner, and asking them to look out for it on Sunday.

I'll close then with what I consider the most important encouragement, which is to point out a great paradox here. While worshipping with kids is tough, it's actually in worship that we, as parents, are given the very strength we need to endure in the demanding task that is raising children. Receive all God's good gifts freely given to you in his Word and Sacrament, and let those flow into your family life.

*'Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these'.* (Matt 19:14)

Yours in Christ, Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer