

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

Like many of you I have been deeply disturbed by the tragic circumstances surrounding Brooke Bennet, the young girl whose body was discovered last week. It goes without saying that our prayers are with the family at this difficult time. We like to think that such things do not happen. And if they do, we like to think they happen in urban areas a long way. But in the last week we have had our eyes opened. I know many of us would prefer that we did not know what we now know. But knowing what we do we cannot bury our heads in the sand. While such horror defies all that is good, in the face of these kind of unspeakable crimes we have a choice to make. We can agree that such tragic evil is all the proof that is needed that there is no God. Or we can agree that there are no simple answers, and that people of faith like all other people, still struggle to comprehend. What we simply cannot do is pretend all is well with the world, and affirm that these awful events have some deeper mystical purpose. That would be the way of quackery, superstition and charlatanism, making God into some kind of sadist.

This morning in one of those moments of serendipity, our readings are all about children. On the one hand Jesus talks negatively about children. He compares his contemporaries with youngsters always looking for attention, seeking out endless affirmation. And yet, on the other hand, Jesus talks positively about children. For him

the most important things have been hidden from the intelligent and wise, and instead revealed to the youngest among us.

I think our own society shares this schizoid vision of children. As a culture we view children either through the lens of 'The Lord of the Flies' or through the prism of 'Peter Pan.' Either originally full of sin, or hard wired to God, the experience of childhood has been theologically read as either the purest of negatives or the purest of positives. The problem with both these approaches is that in each case they are adult constructs. Neither allows childhood to be valued in its own terms, instead the child becomes the symbol of adult neuroses.

Of course, none of this is news. But only the most unreflective could not demand that we look again at the way our society is constructing childhood. All around us children are treated as adult consumers, bombarded with sophisticated advertising not just on television and internet, but also at school and in other public places. The truth of the matter is that childhood has never been innocent. In the nineteenth century children would be working in mines or sweeping chimneys. But in the twenty-first century way our obsession with security has seen us deny children all sorts of freedoms that previous generations took for granted. Clearly sending a thirteen year old to do manual labor for ten hours a day was not a good thing. Equally, today who can not feel at least some sympathy for the New York journalist who was publicly

pilloried for allowing her youngsters the controlled freedom of taking the subway on their own.

In practical terms, the dilemma that faces parents is similar to the dilemma that faces Homeland Security. Security can be bought, but at a cost. And as we demand ever greater security, we erode trust, and we slowly destroy the fabric that holds society together.

Theologically, the idea of perfect security is of course an illusion. Nothing we can do will ever secure us from all threats. For at the end of the day, the only totally secure state of being, is death. Everything else is vulnerable to change. And if society were to manufacture the perfectly secure state, which it cannot, it would resemble a gulag or a concentration camp. Maybe secure, but not somewhere you would want to raise a child.

As this country celebrates its founding this July 4th weekend, I think we all need to reflect on these large questions of security, both domestic and foreign. The more energy we expend searching for security the less energy this society will have to make it a society worth living in. One can't help but wonder what the crime rate would be in urban areas if funds used for building internationally illegal and unnecessary nuclear weapons were put into job creation or education. And one can't help but wonder what might have been done in fighting poverty or providing universal healthcare if billions had not been spent funding ill advised overseas wars. As all but the blindest can see, attempts to produce security by

military means have resulted in greater insecurity for our whole world.

This weekend we remember a disproportionately large number of Episcopalians standing up against the unjust intrusions of the king of England. The question for contemporary Episcopalians is whether you are ready to resist the corruption and injustice of a political system that rewards those with the most and steals the future from those with the least.

Paul was right when articulated just how hard it is to do the right thing. Even when you know what the right thing to do is, the will can be weak. It seems to me that as followers of Christ we need to acknowledge the fact that our will too is weak. If it were stronger, and if we were clearer, we would be able to resist the forces that dehumanize others. But as things are, we are reluctant to see that we do have a responsibility towards others.

Yet the truth is, until we see the world through the eyes of children our world does not have a hope. We have to affirm the dreamlike innocence of children. We have to do everything in our power to make that innocence a living reality for those stuck in cycles of deprivation. And we have to allow ourselves to let go of the world weary cynicism that immunizes us from attempting positive change. Without the young, without the infants, without the hope that there can be something new our society would have collapsed in on itself centuries ago.

In the movie *Children of Men*, based on the work by the Anglican novelist P.D. James, there is a scene in which the British army is having a fire fight with guerrillas equipped with RPGs and machine guns. The sound of the cannon is deafening, with shrapnel tearing through concrete as each side fights for control of a tower block. All of a sudden a strange sound pierces the cacophony of rockets and gunfire. It is the cry of a baby. Suddenly there is a devastating silence. The two sides hold their fire. And for a few moments all the fighters are transfixed on the baby and peace reigns.

If we are to hear the words of Jesus today, we too need to understand what it is that God chooses to reveal and communicate through an infant. Perhaps it is their vulnerability. Perhaps it is their ability to live completely in the present. Perhaps it is their absolute honesty about their needs. Perhaps it is the care and compassion that they draw out from us. Or perhaps, dare I say it on this independence weekend, it is the fact that they are not independent, but profoundly dependent: they need others.

Whatever it is, know that we too in the eyes of God are called to be like infants, with a faith that is childlike but not childish. And may each of us do all in our power to make our world more hospitable for all God's children, no matter who they are, no matter where they are. Amen.