

“Suffer the little children to come unto me” *

As I sit here and contemplate this piece, several thoughts immediately crowd into my mind. In a sketch called ‘Common Entrance’, by the late, great comic actor Peter Sellers, the Headteacher of “... that great British public school, Cretinby ...” says to a prospective parent, “You may not realise this Sir, but some of our greatest men started life as children.” In one school report of the much loved actor, writer and raconteur, Peter Ustinov, the Headteacher sums it up with, “This boy shows great initiative, which should be curbed at all costs”. In my final year at school, for some reason I was missed off the list of names by the P.E. teacher. Bliss! I managed to avoid P.E. and Games for a whole year. Perhaps Peter Ustinov’s report comment could have been applied to me. Instead all I got was ‘Satisfactory’. And my Daddy in his failing years once said, “Growing old is lousy”, to which I replied, “But it can’t be half as bad as growing up.” Now I’m beginning to understand what he was alluding to.

The Old Testament contains numerous references to children, many you will remember; The great migration of the Children of Israel, (Ex 12:37) when 600,000 men ‘... as well as women and children...’, set off through the wilderness, Moses in the bulrushes (Ex 2:3), Samuel in the temple (1 Sam 3:4), Abraham and Sarah having a child, Isaac ‘... when they were very old.’ (Gen 18:14), Abraham offering to sacrifice Isaac to God (Gen 21:3), David and Goliath (1 Sam 17:49), Joseph and his coat of many colours (Gen 37:3)

The New Testament similarly refers to the Children of God, the believers (John 1:12), or those ‘... led by the Spirit’, (Rom 8:14) and those ‘... through faith in Christ ...’ are so called (Gal 3:26). Jesus heals the epileptic boy (Matt 17:14-18), and Jairus’ daughter who was ‘...at death’s door’ (Mark 5:23), and he asks, “Would you give your child a stone if he asked for bread, or a serpent if she asked for fish?”. (Mat 7:9-10).

But here is a puzzle: we were all taught the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand at Sunday school, and the little boy with the five loaves and two fishes. Yes? Remember? Have you ever thought why a small boy would have five loaves with him, on a day out in the country? Well I hate to disillusion you, but there is no reference to a small boy in any of the Gospel accounts. Sorry. (Mat 14:17 Mark 6:38 Luke 9:13)

The title for this piece, is taken from the King James bible, where ‘suffer’ is used in its old meaning of ‘allow’, or ‘tolerate’. But it has a particular poignancy for us today in its current meaning of suffering.

A warning; what follows contains details which some of you will find distressing. You may wish to move on to the next article.

If you are still reading, contemplate these figures; between January and June, in this year of our Lord 2016, 10,500 unaccompanied children reached Italy by sea. 600 drowned, that’s two a day. Since the crisis around the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean started, 10,000 children have gone missing across Europe. How many children have we taken into the UK so far? And just how safe are they?

In our own Country, according to the charity Missingkids, ‘... a child is reported missing every three minutes.’ According to ‘Childline’, there is ‘... a soaring number of children seeking help for suicidal thoughts...’. In 2015/16, the NSPCC counselled 19,481 children about suicide, that’s one every half an hour. ‘Girlguiding’ has just reported that 39% of 7-10 year-old girls believe they are ‘... not pretty enough.’ 57,000 children and young people were identified as

suffering abuse or trafficking, from other countries or across the UK; this includes sexual exploitation, benefit fraud, forced marriage, domestic servitude (cleaning, cooking and baby-minding.) Even more alarming, is that the NSPCC estimates for every one of those identified, there are another eight suffering abuse. *You* do the maths; that's nigh on a million traumatised youngsters who are being denied a natural family upbringing. Incidence of self-harming amongst young people is on the increase.

Loughborough University's School of Sport, Exercise and Health, recently published a report showing that a third of four-year-olds, have mobility problems, an all-time low, in 2016!; obesity, lack of exercise, addiction to electronic devices – mobile 'phones, tablets and games consoles – parental fear of letting children play out of doors, fear of risk-taking – even the Health and Safety Executive has said that some of the actions taken by Local Authorities, schools and children's services are too extreme.

Growing *old* may be lousy, but for many young people, growing *up* is much worse. The reasons are legion; peer pressure, bullying, low self-esteem, worries about sexuality, cultural and racial tensions, money concerns, relationships, and inappropriate images online, are just some of the problems. So Yes, please suffer the little, and not so little children, who suffer themselves more than we know. Give more generously to children's charities, support the BBC's Children in Need – it's never too late ... I don't need to go on, you get the picture. Remember suffer has two meanings.

Howard Brayton

* Luke 18:16 (KJ)