Two weeks ago I stood here and exclaimed how glad I was that the gospel was straightforward, direct, and easy to preach into. And lamented that sometimes the gospel is obtuse and one is never sure what to do with it. Well, today is one of those latter days. The beheading of John the Baptist! I have struggled how to preach it all week. While we are not required to preach on the gospel, I try to do so, and to preach into the ‘rub.’ That difficult part of the gospel. And there is a ‘rub’ in the gospel reading today.

You know the story of King Herod’s banquet, all the guests, and the daughter dancing what is usually portrayed as provocatively, especially in operas such as Salomé, which can be pretty graphic. Particularly with the severed head of John the Baptist. But the fact is that our gospel describes her as a ‘girl.’ And the original Greek word used indicates a young girl, a child. So some of those interpretations are off. And the fact is that the daughter, a girl, is a pawn of her mother in the story. And likely had no idea what she was asking for when she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter! Kids are very trusting and ascribe the best attributes to everyone. And are so honest and direct. So rather than dwelling on this difficult and gruesome story, I want to use the daughter, being used as a pawn of her mother, to talk about children and how they are instructive for us in our religious lives.

How many of us remember the Art Linkletter Show? I think it was called, ‘Kids say the Darnedest Things!’ I believe he turned it into a book as well. It had a great following and really showed insight into children’s minds and thoughts. Likewise there are legendary things kids have said in church, about church.

For example, the Lord’s Prayer has been recited as, ‘Our Father who does art in heaven, Harold be thy name, thy kingdom come, I will be done with dressings made in heaven. Give us our jelly bread and forgive us our trash baskets...’ Or, ‘Our Father, who art in heaven, how didja know my name?’ And the little girl who thought she was praying for her little sister to get into trouble as she learned, ‘lead a snot into temptation.’ Or the Creed, ‘...He suffered under a bunch of violets!’ instead of Pontius Pilate. Kids hear what they know.
Then there was the little boy who was overheard praying, ‘Lord, if You can’t make me a better boy, don’t worry about it. I’m having a really good time like I am!’ And you know about the little girl in church for the first time who, on seeing the ushers pass the offering plate said loudly as it came by her parents, ‘Don’t pay for me Daddy, I’m under five.’ Then there was the little girl who became restless as the preacher’s sermon dragged on. Finally she leaned over to her mother and whispered, ‘Mommy, if we give him the money now, will he let us go?’

And speaking of sermons there was the preacher’s kid who was watching his father write a sermon and asked, ‘How do you know what to say?’ The father replied, ‘Why, God tells me.’ And the kid responded ‘Oh, then why do you keep crossing things out?’ Or the little girl who noticed that her priest father always paused and bowed his head for a moment before starting his sermon, and then asked him, why. He responded, ‘Well honey, I’m asking the Lord to help me preach a good sermon.’ ‘Well then, how come He doesn’t do it?’ she queried. And then there was the mother who was giving instruction to her three children as she sent them into Sunday school, ‘And why is it necessary to be quiet in church?’ Her son quickly responded, ‘Because people are sleeping’

And then there is Sunday school when the teacher instructed the kids to write a letter to God on Sunday afternoon — one read ‘Dear God, We had a good time in church today. Wish you could have been there.’ And Johnny who stayed home from church with a baby sitter on Palm Sunday because of a sore throat. When the family returned home carrying palm branches he asked what they were for. ‘People held them over Jesus’ head as he walked by’ they informed him. ‘Wouldn’t you know it,’ the boy fumed. ‘The one Sunday I don’t go and He shows up!’

And in the Sunday school class when the teacher said, ‘If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church...would that get me into heaven?’ ‘No!’ the children all answered. ‘If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into Heaven?’ Again, the answer was ‘No!’ ‘Well then, if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children, and loved my wife, would that get me into heaven?’ Again, ‘No!’ ‘Well then, how can I get into heaven?’ the teacher queried. A voice from the back of the room shouted, ‘YOU GOTTA BE DEAD!’

And my favorite. The pastor noticed little Mary staring at the large plaque in the foyer of the church. It was covered with names, and small American flags were mounted on either side of it. The seven year old had been staring at the plaque for some time, so the pastor walked up, stood beside her and said quietly, ‘Good morning, Mary.’ ‘Good morning,’ replied the young girl, still focused on the plaque, and then asked, ‘What is this?’ ‘Well, dear, it’s a memorial to all the young men and women who died in the service.’ Soberly, they stood together, staring at the large plaque. Her voice was trembling and barely audible when she asked, ‘Which service, the 800 o’clock or the 1000 o’clock?’

Kids have a different perspective. Their queries are sincere. Their reactions and responses are unguarded, honest, direct. Kids don’t see strife or conflict or racism until they are taught. Several years ago there was a study done in Northern Ireland about the perceptions of kids regarding the Protestant Catholic conflict that inflicted great strife on that area for decades. The study showed that kids didn’t develop prejudices until about the age of seven or eight. And they were taught it. You may remember the song from South Pacific, ‘You’ve got to be carefully taught.’ Young kids are color blind. Just watch young children play. Everybody is their friend. They laugh and jump and yell unabashedly. And their eyes twinkle with love and joy.
What happens that we lose that? Or that some of us lose that? Nuances and strategies and calculating are adult tenets, not children's. As is evil. There is a reason that Jesus said, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me.' And when the disciples asked him 'who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' that He answered, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'

Herod and his wife Herodias were violating the laws regarding marriage of a brother's wife and Herodias was looking to kill John the Baptist, for John was holding the mirror up for them and giving them a hard time about it. But, the gospel says, 'Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man.' And it says that when Herod 'heard John he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him.' John was indeed a righteous and holy man.

Children are righteous and holy people. And it is for that reason that they are instructive for us in our lives. As are many of the inspirational righteous and holy people throughout the ages. People that maintained some of that 'childness'. (My word.) Think of some of them; the righteous and holy people in our Christian heritage through the ages — St. Augustine, Dame Julian of Norwich, St. Benedict, Teresa of Avila, Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa, Archbishop Oscar Romero killed at the altar in Central America, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Barbara Harris, first woman Episcopal bishop. In our Episcopal tradition we have a book called *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* that has one page biographies of holy people. And we have another more recent book called *Holy Women, Holy Men* that is very similar. People with a purity of spirit and action that model Christian life for us. And not just religious leaders are righteous and holy, but also people of all walks — Dag Hammarschold, Jimmy Carter just in the press this week with his new memoir at the age of 90, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Ann Frank, Barbara Jordan.

Herod protected John because he was a righteous and holy man. Until…. Being a righteous and holy person does not protect one from struggles or difficulties, or danger. John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Clemente Pinckney in Charleston last week. Being a holy person does not protect one from difficulty and travail: John the Baptist; the disciples, all but one of them were martyred; Oscar Romero. Leading a holy life does not prevent us from difficulty. Saying our prayers does not get our requests, does not answer our petitions necessarily. Rather, praying aligns us more with God's will, with God's ways. Our religious life is not a formula for 'gimme.'

Living godly, holy lives is not a quid pro quo, a tit for tat, a scratch my back situation. Living holy lives is about putting us in right relation with God. And with our neighbor. Praying aligns us more with God's will, with God's ways. It is not a formula to get what we want. Praying is about our relationship with God. *Our* part of it.

Holy Women and Holy Men, and children, are exemplary for us. Looking at the lives of those spiritual giants that have gone before us is instructive for us. Brother James Koester of the Cowley Fathers monastery wrote this week, 'It is possible for us to become more loving, more forgiving, more generous, more open, more welcoming. All you need is to pay attention to those in whom we have seen it happen. That is where our predecessors and ancestors in the faith come in.' We look at their relationship with God. At what they have given to it. Clemente Pinckney.
We can learn from looking at the lives of holy women and holy men and children. Gentleness, honesty, directness, kindness, joy, humor. Saints, holy women and holy men, predecessors and ancestors in the faith are our examples to follow. And children. One of my great spiritual mentors, whom I have met and dined with on three occasions is Archbishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. He preaches eloquently that God loves all God’s children, that God sheds a tear when we are mean to one another. And he has a smile and a childlike twinkle in his eye that belies a godliness worth emulating. That twinkle in the eye that children have… All of us know people we can emulate. And children. Jesus said, ‘Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.’

When Johnny cried in the back of the car on the way home from the baptism service, and his father asked him what was wrong, he replied, ‘The priest said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home, and I wanted to stay with you guys.’ Do we model a Christian home?

How do we live our lives with holiness and righteousness as our holy exemplars and children model for us? Perhaps the prophet Micah said it best two and a half millennia ago, in the 7th century BC, when he said ‘What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?’

Walking humbly with our God is our part of it. Our investment. Our following the examples of righteous and holy people, and of children.

There is a story of a woman who had been used to every luxury and to all respect. She died, and when she arrived in heaven, an angel was sent to conduct her to her house there. They passed many a lovely mansion and the woman thought that each one, as they came to it, must be the one allotted to her. When they had passed through the main streets they came to the outskirts where the houses were much smaller; and on the very fringe they came to a house which was little more than a shack.

“That is your house,” said the conducting angel.

“What!” said the woman. “That! I cannot live in that.”

“I am sorry,” said the angel, “but that is all we could build for you with the materials you sent up.”

What are we sending up? What is our investment? Who do we model? Whoever becomes humble like this child is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Amen.