

19th July 2026 – Morning Service
Action for Children Sunday – Everyone's Welcome!
Melanie Walters

Call to Worship

We are a chosen people. **A family people.**
Chosen for love **and to share love.**
Chosen for joy **and to spread joy.**
Chosen for friendship **and for befriending.**
Chosen for blessing **and to bless.**
Chosen for fruitfulness **and to harvest.**
We are a chosen people. **A family people.**
Your family. **Our family. Amen.**

StF 25 – God is here!

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| 1) God is here! As we his people
Meet to offer praise and prayer,
May we find in fuller measure
What it is in Christ we share.
Here, as in the world around us,
All our varied skills and arts
Wait the coming of his Spirit
Into open minds and hearts. | 3) Here our children find a welcome
In the Shepherd's flock and fold;
Here as bread and wine are taken,
Christ sustains us, as of old;
Here the servants of the Servant
Seek in worship to explore
What it means in daily living
To believe and to adore. |
| 2) Here are symbols to remind us
Of our lifelong need of grace;
Here are table, font, and pulpit;
Here the cross has central place.
Here in honesty of preaching,
Here in silence, as in speech,
Here, in newness and renewal,
God the Spirit comes to each. | 4) Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom,
In an age of change and doubt,
Keep us faithful to the gospel,
Help us work your purpose out.
Here, in this day's dedication,
All we have to give, receive:
We, who cannot live without you,
We adore you! We believe! |

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Introduction

Today, we are marking Action for Children Sunday. This year's theme is Everyone's Welcome. In 1869, Rev Dr Thomas Bowman Stephenson established the National Children's Home; in 2008, this became the charity now known as [Action for Children](#). For 157 years, their work has been driven by love as they have prayed for, supported, and campaigned for vulnerable children and for the lasting changes needed to create safer, happier childhoods. Today, as we seek to understand a little more about one life-changing aspect of their work – the support given to foster carers and the welcome they offer to children and young people at times of need – we also consider what lessons we can learn about what is needed to ensure that everyone is truly welcome.

Prayer of Adoration and Praise

Parent, Son and Holy Spirit, our wonderful, awe-inspiring relational God. You are far greater than anything we can imagine, more wonderful than our deepest joy, more powerful than anything we have ever known. Yours is the authority that was always intended to create. Yours is the sovereignty that holds all things in the palm of your hand. Yours is the everlasting, unconditional love that continually seeks to bring everyone, everywhere, into the joy of the perfect understanding that we are **all** your precious children, called by name to your family and fellowship with you. Gracious God, we adore you; we have come to lay our lives

before you, as we declare, we love you, our God. Forgiving God, we praise you for the love we need but don't deserve, given to us through the life, death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Living God, we rejoice as we welcome your Holy Spirit, your unceasing presence within us, guiding and inspiring our worship of you! **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 72 – Father God, I wonder

Father God, I wonder
how I managed to exist
without the knowledge
of your parenthood,
and your loving care.
But now I am your child,
I am adopted in your family,
and I can never be alone
'cause Father God,
you're there beside me.

I will sing Your praises,
I will sing Your praises,
I will sing Your praises forevermore.
I will sing Your praises,
I will sing Your praises,
I will sing Your praises forevermore.

Ian Smale © 1984 Thankyou Music

Talk



Now I bet you are wondering why on earth I've included a collection of pictures of shoes. Shoes say a lot about their wearer, though, so I wonder what we can learn about the owners of these shoes just by looking at them?

- Number one, for example, whoever owns them is a real snappy dresser, a businessman perhaps, certainly someone who likes to look very smart.
- Number two – this one belongs to someone, possibly a young woman who wants to seem taller, and perhaps they like a bit of a party?
- Number three – so these are certainly shoes for dancing, and it looks like they have been working hard, as they are well worn on the bottom.
- Number four – these are teeny tiny...so their owner is very small, perhaps a toddler. Whilst these look brand new, they are certainly for someone who likes to kick a ball about.
- Number five – erm, a bit bigger than number four, and from the looks of those muddy bottoms, this is someone who likes to be very active and is potentially quite messy!
- Number six – our last pair suggests someone who is very practical, sensible even; they are sturdy, comfortable, protective and built for walking the extra mile – just like their owners, perhaps.

These shoes are all different shapes and sizes; they look different... some are super smart and shiny, some are covered in dirt, others are real workers, and yet others are faithful, comfortable old friends. The shoes come from and go to all kinds of places; they all share some things in common. They all have the same purpose – they look after feet; they are all members of the shoe family, so whilst each shoe is vastly different, to the people whose feet they protect, they all have equal value.

Whilst Jesus was on earth, he taught the disciples a lot about what it means to belong to God's family. Often, the disciples struggled to get the lessons being taught. In today's Bible reading, Jesus is tackling one such misunderstanding. As we read, it is important to remember that although Jesus calls the original twelve to him, the group following him had, by this point, grown. Most likely a bit like our shoe family, the household where Jesus breaks his journey included a mixed bag of men and women of different ages, with varied experiences and needs. As this reading suggests, amongst them, there were also children. As you read, what else stands out to you?

Reading: Mark 9: 30-37 (NIV)

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.' But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the road?' But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.'

He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.'

StF 161 – Speak O Lord

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| <p>1) Speak, O Lord, as we come to you
To receive the food of your holy word.
Take your truth, plant it deep in us;
Shape and fashion us in your likeness,
That the light of Christ might be seen today
In our acts of love and our deeds of faith.
Speak, O Lord, and fulfil in us
All your purposes, for your glory.</p> | <p>2) Teach us, Lord, full obedience,
Holy reverence, true humility.
Test our thoughts and our attitudes
In the radiance of your purity.
Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see
Your majestic love and authority.
Words of power that can never fail;
Let their truth prevail over unbelief.</p> |
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3) Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds;
Help us grasp the heights of your plans for us.
Truths unchanged from the dawn of time
That will echo down through eternity.
And by grace we'll stand on your promises,
And by faith we'll walk as you walk with us.
Speak, O Lord, till your Church is built
And the earth is filled with your glory.

Keith Getty & Stuart Townend © 2005 Thankyou Music

Sermon

O Lord, as we come to you, take your truth and plant it deep within us, till your church is built and the earth filled with your glory. **Amen.**

Imagine for a moment that you're the child in today's Bible story. This man, Jesus, who everybody says is a great teacher, has come to your house, and there is a lot of excitement that you probably don't quite understand. You haven't said anything. You are crouched low in a corner, out of sight but watching, listening as the adults around you talk to one another. You notice they are talking quite seriously about something – it seems to be a discussion that started earlier – they sound tense, almost argumentative. It's not a conversation you really get, but you can tell it matters to the grown-ups. Maybe one day it will matter to you as well. Their big question seems to be *Who is the greatest?* The greatest what, you wonder? Just as you start to give that some thought, something you really hadn't expected happens. Jesus notices you. He leans towards you with his arm outstretched, calling you over. He leads you out of your corner right into the middle of the room, so now everyone can see you. This is new! Normally, the grown-ups want you to stay out of the way unless they want to question you, tell you to behave better, or try harder. Jesus doesn't ask you a question. He doesn't test you. He doesn't tell you to behave better or try harder. He puts his arm around you, holds you gently and says to the grown-ups, "Whoever welcomes a child like this welcomes me."

If you were that child, what a wonderful moment that would be! In those eight words, you might hear Jesus saying that you are no longer overlooked but seen, no longer in the way but part of all that is going on, no longer on the edge looking in but that you belong. Did you notice that before the child becomes an example for the disciples, they are first and foremost to Jesus, a person – noticed, drawn closer, welcomed, embraced, loved.

Earlier, the disciples were arguing over which of them was the greatest. You might remember there is another conversation like this in Mark 10: 42-45 and similar ones in both Matthew and Luke. Then, as now, the question of what greatness looks like and how it is achieved was a hotly debated topic. In those passages and here, Jesus' response is consistent as he completely redefines greatness. Greatness in the Kingdom of God doesn't look like winning the argument, being in charge or being the most important person in the room.

Remember, Jesus chooses a child.

In Biblical thought, a child symbolises not innocence as we might imagine but the least, the powerless. Children lacked status and were overlooked by the adults around them. They had no voice in the argument.

Both here and over the page in Mark 10: 13-15, Jesus places the child at the very centre of that argument and says, "This is what my kingdom looks like".

This tells us something very significant about God. This tells us definitively what greatness looks like. Greatness looks like loving action, which is not exclusive to the strong, successful and confident because God's love is for everyone, especially the least. Greatness looks like servant hearts that make greater or lift

those who crouch low, hide in corners, who feel small, uncertain or overlooked because God's love brings the least to the heart of things – especially children.

This lesson is over two thousand years old, and yet today, there are still children who crouch low, who hide in corners, who feel small, uncertain or overlooked. Some cannot live safely with their birth families. Some move between homes like they are the parcel being passed in a game. Some carry worries, losses and fears that are a load too heavy for a child to carry. Often, they feel unwanted, unsettled, or unsure where they belong.

In those situations, the message "You belong here" matters more than can be measured. This is why the children's homes run by Action for Children and the support they offer to foster carers and children going through difficult times are so important. They offer an immediate response, offering care when children and young people are at their most vulnerable and in need of safety and stability. Their work ensures children are placed at the centre, with a roof over their heads and a chance to feel seen, protected and valued.

Learning about and supporting work like that of Action for Children echoes the welcome Jesus says is the equivalent of welcoming God. The welcome we give can take many forms. It begins in prayer for children and young people, particularly those who are vulnerable and supported by the care system and organisations like Action for Children. It might include supporting foster families and the work of Action for Children. It also looks like church communities where children feel safe, are listened to, are taken seriously and know that they belong. Children are not just receivers of God's love; they are signs of God's kingdom in action.

Take your mind back to the picture Mark creates of Jesus, sitting with his disciples, holding a child close to him and saying: When you welcome this child, you welcome me. And if you welcome me, then you also welcome the One who sent me.

May we be people who understand that to be those who welcome **all** means to be people willing to be last of all and servants of all. People who help everyone, and especially children, hear not just once but always: You are seen. You are safe. You belong here. Amen.

Response

When I looked at the resources prepared by Action for Children for this year, a story from our own family sprang to mind. Last Christmas Day, Richard's cousin sat down and ate a plate of baked beans on toast for lunch. In the fridge, there was a fresh turkey and all the trimmings, ready and waiting to be cooked, but the night before, two tired, young people, feeling small, uncertain and overlooked, the latest in a long line of foster children, had arrived for emergency care. Beans on toast felt safe. It smelt and tasted of what they knew. It was simple and uncomplicated, and it said: You are seen. You are safe. You belong here.

Earlier, we thought about how shoes are all different, just like we are. The children Richard's cousin fosters are all different; they have all experienced different things, but all of them have experienced things no one should have to go through. The thing they have in common, the thing Richard's cousin can provide, is the welcome which offers the safety and security of a loving home where these vulnerable youngsters know they are seen and belong.

Making vulnerable children welcome when their world has tipped on its axis is an art, a gift which cannot be taught. It is what foster carers do time and again with compassion, kindness, patience, humility, and gentleness, all bound together with love; signs we might recognise as evidence of God's Spirit at work.

What part might we play in supporting a child like that?

We have already started by finding out more about the work of foster carers and Action for Children; perhaps today will be the catalyst to seek out even more, or to offer support in practical ways. We can all pray, and that is just what we are going to do now.

Prayers of Confession and Thanksgiving

God, who welcomes everyone, we are sorry for the times when we have failed to respond to the open arms you offer us by opening our arms and hearts to others in need of that same welcome. In the silence, we pause to make our own confession.

Welcoming God, thank you that because Jesus died for our sins, we belong in your family and can know the forgiveness of the welcome, which, makes us call God: 'Abba, our Father.' As God's Spirit causes us to know that we are God's children, [and] our own spirits agree that this is true. (Romans 8:15-16)

In gratitude for all we have received from you, we pray for children in care, that they too will know this deep sense of being welcome. We thank you for foster carers and those who staff children's homes. May you fill them with all the love, energy and grace they need to be the carers these children need them to be. Thank you for the dedication, patience, and love of those who care. Thank you, too, for all the people who surround foster families with support, whether they are professionals, family members or friends. Our prayer is that you would give them wisdom, grace, and steadfastness to support carers in the ways that are needed. We ask that you would help them to be quick to listen and slow to judge. Please give guidance and clarity of thought to all those who might consider becoming foster carers, so that they can make the right decisions. Be with them on their journey and surround them with people to support and encourage them. And please help us all to be welcoming of others, in all sorts of ways. Just as you welcome us. **Amen.**

StF 615 – Let love be real

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| 1) Let love be real, in giving and receiving,
Without the need to manage and to own;
A haven free from posing and pretending,
Where every weakness may be safely known.
Give me your hand, along the desert pathway,
Give me your love wherever we may go. | 2) Let love be real, not grasping or confining,
That strange embrace that holds yet sets us free;
That helps us face the risk of truly living,
And makes us brave to be what we might be.
Give me your strength when all my
words are weakness;
Give me your love in spite of all you know. |
| Ch) <i>As God loves us, so let us love each other:
 With no demands, just open hands and
 space to grow.</i> | 3) Let love be real, with no manipulation,
No secret wish to harness or control;
Let us accept each other's incompleteness,
And share the joy of learning to be whole.
Give me your hope through dreams
and disappointments;
Give me your trust when all my failings show. |

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Prayers of Intercession

Recently, in response to Matthew 10: 40-42, where Jesus teaches the disciples another lesson about the kind of welcome God desires, Rev Jem spoke about how making others welcome requires making a space and finding a place. He rightly observed that making a space involves giving up or letting go. Richard's cousin, whom we heard about earlier, made space for her foster children by letting go of what Christmas Dinner looks like.

As we look at our Church communities today, I wonder where we may need God's help to make space so that the world beyond our walls can know that here is a place where everyone is welcome and all can find a place where they belong.

Pause for time to think...

Loving Lord, when you made a space for the child that day, you taught us to welcome the least, the small, the vulnerable, the uncertain, the overlooked because your love is all-encompassing and makes room for

everyone. The need for your love beyond these walls, in the community in which you place us to serve, is as vast as it is diverse.

Loving Lord, our prayer as we think of the isolated elderly; the vulnerable homeless; the lonely young parents; the child who needs to know its ok; the lost and wandering teens; those who feel invisible or lacking status because they cannot find work; or those in need of a friendly face as they try to settle in a new place; is that you will help us to be people, a community who make the space which allows others, whoever they are and whatever their need to find this place a place where they know the love which lets them know they belong. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who died and rose again, that all might know themselves welcome. **Amen.**

StF 409 – Let us build a house

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| 1) Let us build a house where love can dwell
And all can safely live,
A place where saints and children tell
How hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions,
Rock of faith and vault of grace;
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions: | 3) Let us build a house where love is found
In water, wine and wheat:
A banquet hall on holy ground
Where peace and justice meet.
Here the love of God, through Jesus,
Is revealed in time and space;
As we share in Christ the feast that frees us: |
| Ch) <i>All are welcome,
All are welcome,
All are welcome in this place.</i> | 4) Let us build a house where hands will reach
Beyond the wood and stone
To heal and strengthen, serve and teach,
And live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger
Bear the image of God's face;
Let us bring an end to fear and danger: |
| 2) Let us build a house where prophets speak,
And words are strong and true,
Where all God's children dare to seek
To dream God's reign anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness
And as symbol of God's grace;
Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus: | 5) Let us a build a house where all are named,
Their songs and visions heard
And loved and treasured, taught and claimed
As words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter,
Prayers of faith and songs of grace,
Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter: |

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Closing prayer and blessing

In this house, may all people be welcome. In this house, may all people find love. Lord, open the doors so all the world may enter. Open our hearts to share your love.

Let the cross shine out like a beacon, bringing hope to all needing God's love. Just as this place bears witness to your splendour, may our lives bear witness to your love.

For the Church is more than bricks and concrete, more than glass and metal, nails and wood. It's in the lives of all of those who serve him and who welcome the world to God's love.

The blessing of God, Father, Son and Spirit be with us all evermore, **amen.**

