

Thinking differently about children's work

Reflections on Godly Play

Diane Craven (Diocesan Children's Work Adviser) writes:



This is not mere instruction or moralising – instead it takes us deep into the longings of the human heart and into the love that God sets upon us as a people for his own possession.

This inner journey of engagement with the essence of the biblical narratives is arguably the key to what Godly Play is about.

Later, there is time to wonder about this parable.

Although in the beginning the replies to questions such as 'I wonder if the merchant had a name?' provoke some humour, the later questions draw out replies that demonstrate deep reflection on the material and the challenges of it.

'I wonder if you have ever come close to the Great Pearl?'

Testing limits

Just as humour often explores boundaries, it seems that the whole Godly Play approach is about testing limits – the limits of theological language, of messy human feelings and experience (can it really find a place here in connection with God's story?) and of the biblical narrative itself.

Above all, you are invited to find your own story within God's story, to take the challenge of this to heart and to find a language in which to speak of these deep things. It is called play but actually it is work – and it is the kind of theological work that adults as well as children need to do.

When the storyteller asks 'I wonder if you have ever come close to the Great Pearl, the



Godly Play used in the context of First Communion preparation

The storyteller

It is very quiet in the room. You can sense the quiet as you stand at the entrance. There is a friendly, welcoming person at the door who invites me in and as I move into the centre of the room I can see that there is a group gathering there, sitting in a circle on the floor.

Looking around and trying to get some sense of what is going on, I can see shelves with boxes on them and one shelf in particular at the focal point of the group, with figures representing the holy family and an image of the risen Christ on the wall behind the table.

The Storyteller waits as the circle gathers and then she asks 'Are you ready?' Something is about to happen.....Am I ready?

'Watch where I go to collect this story', she says, 'so that you will always know where to find it.'

She settles in front of us with a gold coloured box, and gradually the story unfolds as the materials and figures inside it are brought out and reflected upon.

The materials are handled carefully – reverentially even – and placed with equal sensitivity in a planned arrangement on the floor.

But this is not merely about

having nice wooden artefacts to look at. There is a real attempt here to help the participants engage with the story and this begins with the invitation to remember Jesus: 'There was once someone who said such wonderful things and did such amazing things...'

At various points, the storyteller poses reflective questions – not to gain any set answer, it seems, from the variety of the responses given. The replies are sometimes thoughtful and sometimes downright funny.

But soon we are in the middle of the Parable of the Great Pearl, watching intently as the man gives every last thing that he owns to obtain the pearl.

The storyteller says little in this presentation of the parable, the challenge of this story is in the silent watching as the figure moves slowly backwards and forwards from his house, carrying out each and every object and the last stick of furniture as if to say 'Is this enough for me to buy the pearl? Surely his bed isn't going to go as well – but it does.'

Finally, in a last act of desire and desperation, he rolls up the outline of his home and places it at the feet of the seller.

In the silence, watching someone's life being risked for a pearl, you are led to thinking 'When was the last time that I did anything as risky as this for something – or someone – I loved and desired above all else?'

And what might it have to say about God's reckless love for us?

The people around the table in the World Communion



Finding our place in the circle of the Church year



answers are challenging and intimate. I thought I'd found the Great Pearl once, but it was a pretend one... I had the Great Pearl once but then I lost it.

No one seeks to give an answer to these reflections – after all can loss and longing be given an easy explanation? It seems that acknowledging what often goes unspoken is more important than giving answers to questions that no-one is asking.

Rev Rachel Taylor, Vicar of Holy Cross, Motspur Park says: 'Godly Play is one of a small number of experiences where children are invited to look inside themselves for a response as opposed to giving the right answer.'

Safe enough to think dangerously

Godly Play, with its emphasis on the circle of community and

the creation of sacred space, provides a place that is safe enough in which to think dangerously. In this kind of space, children can be invited to raise big questions, to explore the biblical material and to find themselves – their own hopes, dreams, longings and disappointments – within the story. In other words the children are doing theology...and there is not a worksheet in sight!

Godly Play was developed in the Episcopal Church and it is relatively new in this country. In its purest form it takes place in dedicated spaces called classrooms, following the Montessori tradition of education with its strong emphasis on discovery, imagination and wonder.

Jerome Berryman who has pioneered this work in the Episcopal church says that: 'Godly Play teaches children and adults that being quiet and deliberate about their work can be as satisfying as being noisy, busy and pushy and delivers this counter-cultural message in a comforting and consistent way. Godly Play is not a rote or transfer method of teaching and learning. It is a discovery method that engages the whole child – hands, heart, mind, senses, and intuition. This is the best way for children (and adults) to internalise what is being taught.'

Do you agree? You might like to reflect on this whole statement and consider your regular meetings with children and adults in the light of it. Even though Godly Play may

¹ Jerome W Berryman *The Complete Guide to Godly Play Volume 1 Living the Good News* 2002 pp18-19

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paration

not be right for your context, it is still important to consider how your regular work with children meets their different personalities, abilities and learning styles – and the balance between the cognitive and the sensory dimensions of learning and experience.

Godly Play relies on particular objects and on scripted material for the storytelling – scripts that have been tried and tested for over 30 years by Jerome Berryman and others. Some people feel uncomfortable with the idea of scripts but they do emphasise the importance of ritual language and verbal cues and the balancing of the familiar with the unpredictable.

And don't all good stories rely on those familiar verbal markers

of the opening and the ending...of the invitation to enter in and the questions that either demand a reply or that are left to be puzzled over?

This kind of linguistic and symbolic playfulness is far from being a childish thing; it is at the heart of our liturgical language and action.

Practical issues

Godly Play raises many practical issues – where to find and set up a space...what about having to set up and put away equipment each time? Where do you get the equipment and how much is it? How do you train and how do you prepare?

Most churches using Godly Play do not have the benefit of a space that they can devote solely

to Godly Play. However whether or not we are able to adopt 'full scale' Godly Play, it still presents us with some fundamental challenges to the way in which we go about all our work with children.

These concerns are about how we create sacred space, how we use symbols and focal points; how we open up the word; how we engage in sacramental and symbolic actions; how we build community and how we can engage rather than entertain. Many of these concerns are common to the questions we ask about liturgy for the whole gathered community.

Godly Play, like liturgy, challenges us to consider the deep structure of what we do when we meet together and these structural aspects are important for any gathering of children (or adults).

We will look briefly at four key aspects: Gathering, Offering, Responding, and Leaving

Gathering

How do the children or adults enter the room? How are they invited to settle – to get ready? Godly Play uses a Doorkeeper and a Storyteller.

The Doorkeeper welcomes each person into the room and encourages them to move to the space where the circle of participants is being formed. Later, the Doorkeeper helps the children in moving to their chosen form of response and with practicalities of being in the space. You may see the parallels with the welcome in your church or with the role of the Deacon in the Eucharist. The Storyteller is responsible for presenting the material. Could these roles be usefully adopted for all sessions where children meet?

Think about the space where children meet...what is this room like? Is there a focus? Are there symbols or images that identify the space as sacred? Whether you are doing Godly Play or not, it is important to mark space as sacred and to feed people's minds and imaginations with symbols and images that connect them to the stories and beliefs we hold as important. Many churches use 'focal tables' in the rooms where they meet with children. These tables often use the appropriate liturgical colours and images and symbols related to the lectionary and the church year.

Is there a routine? People need enough familiarity to feel safe enough to take a few risks. As with liturgy, there needs to



be direction, flow and structure to provide a safe framework within which we can explore and play.

Offering

How is the material presented? How is the gathered community invited to make meaning as opposed to having the meaning given to them? How comfortable do we feel about giving children space to do this work themselves and laying aside the power of the 'expert adult' who has all the answers? Godly Play invites us to engage with the material for ourselves and to let it act upon us. A Godly Play practitioner has said: *I find it very exposing when I am doing Godly Play. To me it is a holy thing to offer the sacred stories of our faith – it is something like I imagine celebrating the Eucharist is for a priest.* Priests in this Diocese who practice Godly Play have said that it has changed the way that they celebrate the Eucharist, making them more attentive to the handling of symbolic objects and to matching the verbal with the non-verbal; more aware of silence and more understanding of the ways in which they can enable the whole community to make meaning through what is done at the table.

Responding

After the material has been presented in Godly Play, the children are invited to carry on their reflections and to choose the way in which they would like to do this – e.g. by retelling the story themselves; by responding through artistic activity; by writing etc. In all our work with children, it is worth asking what opportunities are provided where this kind of self-directed response can be made and what media are available for this work.

Leaving

As a Godly Play session draws to a close, the work may often be unfinished. The circle gathers again and the feast is celebrated. There is no 'show and tell', in recognition that the response rightly belongs to the

children and it is both unfinished and ongoing. In all our work and worship with children we might ask ourselves how we recognise that the work goes on outside the 'lesson' and how we mark the end of a session – is there closure and leave-taking?

Godly Play in the Diocese of Southwark

There is a lot of good practice going on in Southwark! Many churches have rethought aspects of their children's work – in particular the issues of space and the structure and content of children's work – following an experience of Godly Play. Two churches in the Diocese (St Mary's Putney and St John's Waterloo) have begun very exciting visionary developments in work with Godly Play and children's spirituality. Alison Seaman is an experienced Godly Play trainer working in Holy Trinity, Eltham and beyond and many members of the clergy have done training courses in Godly Play. Churches work with Godly Play in the preparation of the baptized for Holy Communion, in baptism preparation and confirmation groups. Whether we do Godly Play or not, we all need to take children's spirituality and experience of God seriously and to provide space for the big

questions of life and faith to be explored in the context of sacred space, gathered community and the stories and liturgical actions of the people of God. We all also need to be reminded to look inside ourselves and inside the biblical narrative for responses to these questions. Are you ready?

Taking it further

You can read more about Godly Play in Jerome W Berryman's books: *The Complete Guide to Godly Play Volumes 1-5*, Living the Good News Colorado 2002.

There are also a number of Godly Play practitioners in the Diocese who can help you to consider this approach more fully. The best thing is to experience it for yourself.

Diane Craven and Alison Seaman will be running courses in Children's Spirituality and Godly Play as part of the Diocesan Summer School. Diane and Alison will be offering Godly Play as part of the Woolwich Area Creative Church events and there is a Godly Play classroom in Trumpington, Cambridge where Godly Play courses are offered.

For details of courses and for further advice please contact Diane Craven (Diocesan Children's Work Adviser) diane.craven@southwark.anglican.org

The Good Shepherd and the World Communion



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