

GP UK Annual Lecture 50 minutes (2 hours)

SLIDE 1 What about the God in Godly Play?

Introduction

A short introduction: I want to begin with something that was said at the 2nd Annual Godly Play lecture. Dr Martin Steinhauser said that 'In the Bible the believer can learn that God puts the world in front of him out of pure imagination (creation), that God makes himself imaginable by revealing his name ("I am who I am")'

I am very interested in this idea of God as the imaginer of all that is and who reveals him/herself in ways accessible to human imagination. I want to know more about what this really means. What does it mean to be something imagined and where and how do we find the God who makes him/herself/itself imaginable? I love this idea but I also want to know real, concrete stuff about God, what evidence we have for saying anything at all about God and what relationship we might have with God if I am just one of God's imaginings. I also want what I can know and what I can say to be simple, not wrapped up in complex theologies. So today I want to offer you five propositions about God which I believe we can get directly from engaging with the biblical evidence and indeed with many of the stories that are at the heart of Godly Play. And I want to suggest that those five propositions are most clearly shown, not in councils or commissions or theological college training manuals, but by what can emerge from the Godly Play classroom.

And in another Annual lecture John Pridmore told us:

'Everything that is done in a Godly Play classroom – if it's being done properly – is shaped and fed by its theological roots. Disconnect what you do from those deep roots and all you're left with is a technique and some pretty playthings.' So it's important to know who the God is in Godly Play.

So I am going to ask: *what about the God in Godly Play?* And I will need your help because many of you have the direct experience I am seeking and I need you to tell me your stories and ideas about your work with Godly Play to help me locate these ideas about God more firmly in what we learn from children.

SLIDE 2 My first proposition is that God finds every child worthy of calling.

Children mediate to us a God-language of being and becoming

They represent to us God's word to be BE

SLIDE 3 Look at this baby. Children as responding to the vocation from God to physically be, to grow and to change and develop at the biological level. Unstoppable and intimately related to our spirituality.

What does that mean? We tend to think of vocation as a way of discovering how God is shaping and honing our gifts and talents so that we recognise who we are meant to be and what we are meant to do. It's got something to do with our own imagination opening out in the landscape of God's own imagination. I will get to that, but I think there's something we overlook when we talk about vocation which is that God's calling to us begins first with our being called into being; **that means our bodies are also a response to vocation.** We are called to be embodied creatures, to be formed in the womb, to be born and to grow as children. And that vocation to be human embodied beings continues throughout our lives, until in the end we are called out of them.

SLIDE 4 growth That makes this theological idea very simple. Every time we haven't seen a nephew or a niece for a few months and notice how they've grown and changed. Every wobbly tooth, every hurt knee that scabs over that we notice and comment on; these are things we say every day, but to me this is theology and commenting on the vocation of God to every child. We see God's vocation in lengthening limbs, and physical weight and in every developmental milestone. Just by looking at children, we see God at work. Simple as that. Now of course there are accidents of biology which mean that some children do not develop and grow properly, but in general terms the child that is conceived will develop and grow and nothing can stop it, because God's word and invitation are so powerful. Obviously there are accidents of biology, but I will say next that this is not the will of God. In her book *Saul*, Rosemary Kay talks about her premature baby who died realising in his struggle for survival a powerful spirituality in doing 'This Living' that was filled with response to the vocation to be.

There are some famous passages about how God is intimately involved with children even as they are growing in the womb and they are the ones used in sanctity of life arguments. But I suggest that we reframe life not as a static quality or something we own, but something dynamic, something our bodies do in response to the vocation from the creator God.

Jeremiah 1.4-5; Isaiah 49.1b-3; Psalm 139. 13-16.

The trouble with adults is that we forget that our physical being is a vocation. A lot of people in our society are trying to deny it because we don't like what happens to our bodies as we become older. We try to alter how we grow and how we age, sometimes by altering our children, turning them into mini adults and sometimes by altering ourselves. But the vocation of God to be is calling us right through and out of our lives and children help us to understand it, if we will let them. Most of the time, we don't.

But if physical life, our very biology is a vocation from God, then what this means is that God's vocation to children is evident to us in every way that they explore and use their bodies, whether its being kicked in the bladder by your unborn child, climbing to the top of a slide and being amazed by the change of perspective or spinning around until you fall down dizzy. And one of the things all play makes possible is a way of expressing the joy of that physical being – Paula talked about this in her lecture last year, the intensity and joy registered in Proverbs 8. 30-31 of a child playing in the street.

So our task is to notice children's bodies as a work of God, delighted in, filled with potential, responding constantly to the call to be, to become, and to provide spaces where that vocation can be examined and tested, not just in how children use their own bodies but is enabling them to

imagine where other bodies might be: suppose the sheep fell in the hole; suppose Jesus flew over here; imagine if these figures started walking and kept on walking. Children explore this vocation through their bodies and examine the possibilities for others in all play and through Godly Play.

SLIDE 5 play That means we can see play as the testing of vocation (hide and seek; sardines; dead donkey; grandmother's footsteps; chasing and tagging) – all are yes to God, yes to being human.

Fr John and the Wheelbarrow

SLIDE 6 Jesus Unborn Reframing of Incarnation and Advent – Jesus is coming to us as an unborn child. John 1

Jesus and John the Baptist as the unborn who yet recognise God's purposes. Luke 1/2

SLIDE 7 baptism and hitting First Holy Communion – physical experiences are spiritual experiences

. And so children learn to say yes to God, just by growing. And what is interesting about that, is that the intellectual, spiritual or imagination recognition of God's presence can be dependent on the physical location of the child and the physical experience they have there.

Dress, kneeling, Holy Communion, holding hands

Adverse physical experiences, being hit or neglected also damage the spiritual wellbeing of the child, and because that goes against God's calling, therefore God demands justice for them.

WHEN READING THE BIBLE ABOUT CHILDREN -ALWAYS REMEMBER THE OTHER CHILD.

SLIDE 8 Godly Play as exploration of what happens to bodies and a place to explore the vocation of being.

Recap: here are the things I want us to bear in mind: From conception, the development and growth of the child through birth and onwards is a vocation from God, not static as in 'the gift of life' but dynamic and changing with every new experience

Play is the testing of that vocation, especially physical play and the testing of physical objects in space.

Incarnation is also a response to God's vocation to Jesus to be his son in the world. Jesus is coming to us as an unborn child, who will grow physically in time and in grace and truth and these two things belong together

Jesus and John the Baptist are twinned together and their physical and spiritual vocations interact.

Physical experiences inform children's spirituality and create contexts whereby children can come to realise that they are saying yes to God. When we enable that, we enable that yes. And adverse experiences damage that spiritual growth.

PAUSE

I wonder.....

What early memories do you have which had an impact on your later life?

Where do you see children offering evidence of spiritual awareness and growth?

What kinds of thing do you think hinder children from becoming aware of God's call?

Where might you recognise God's calling to be in the growth and development of children?

Title Slide My second proposition is that God finds all children worthy of salvation

GROW

This carries on the idea of God's justice, because I don't mean salvation in the eschatological sense, whether children go to heaven or not. But in the sense of whether children are enabled to be, to develop, to grow and to flourish.

My proposition can be put very simply: God does not want any child to die.

Isaiah agenda.

It means that God does not forget those children who do not get the chance to flourish.

What I mean by that is that one thing we can say about God is that God does not want any child to die. That might seem a strange thing to say when we look at biblical evidence, where strange random violence happens all the time and children die in droves. Aasgaard 2/5. Yet the prophetic vision is for children to be able to play and explore safely. More to the point, I find God being one who expresses through living children justice for all those who have died. In the British Museum recently, I saw a painting of the Judgement of Solomon. (tell story).

SLIDE JUDGEMENT Judgement of Solomon

It may seem to us that the Judgement is about the fate (or salvation) of the living child, but the painting makes clear that the Judgement is about justice for the dead child. The dead child, who should not have died, is held up at the heart of the story. Because this child is dead, this living child will not die. So there are two stories which show us God's passion for the life and wellbeing of children.

Ishmael and Isaac, - the Rabbis.

Similarly, take the sacrifice of Isaac, -what a bewildering and disturbing and horrible story, that God should ask a parent to kill his own child. But what a lot of people forget is that Abraham has another son, Ishmael and he has sent that child and his mother out into the desert. Ishmael believing that all

is lost cries out, and God hears his cry and saves him. The Rabbinic commentators make it clear that Ishmael is in God's mind when he comes to demand Isaac. Justice for Ishmael, demands that Abraham should be forced to think about the loss of Isaac, the one that he has privileged, but what about the abandoned son, the lost son. Abraham is asked to enact the suffering he has placed on Ishmael, but God cuts through our big ideas about what children should be, all children deserve God's justice. So Godly Play offers the dignity, inclusion, trust and reciprocity which God desires for all children. Children should not be cut off from God, yet they have been abandoned in the wilderness by so many churches, we don't care what they get up to as long as they are out of sight and out of mind. In the experience of church they may be spiritually starving, but God hears them. One of the places where God may especially hear them is in and through Godly Play. Yet still the God of Godly Play tests us – do you still love Isaac more, are there Ishmaels who we really rather not include?

SLIDE JEPHTHAH

Jephthah's daughter – What though are we to make of the story of Jephthah's daughter? (Tell story).

It is followed by the story of Manoah and they are blessed with a child – children can be neglected and suffer because we're so busy thinking about ourselves and we don't think through the consequences of our words and plans. But for those who understand that life is a sacred calling and must be treated as such God rewards.

SLIDE PICASSO So God is a powerful judge and advocate for children.

SLIDE images Images of God

How else do we know that God does not want children to die, but to grow and flourish? The second thing I want to say about how God finds children worthy of salvation is the matter of the God who demands justice for all children. I find three important female metaphors in the Bible for God in this mode and these are:

The weeping woman

Picasso, - the tears of the weeping woman are not in vain, they cut through the violence and randomness of violence towards children. We hear the weeping women in our society, the Mothers of south America who refuse to let their quest for justice be lost.

The courageous midwives

We hear about the courageous midwives who stand up to Pharaoh, championing children as many of our children's societies do today.

The roused she-bear

Walter Brueggemann says that the three places in the Bible where we have the metaphor of a roused she-bear who has lost her cubs shows to us a face of the divine passion of God for justice for children. And we find the roused she bears, in people like Sara Payne and Kate McCann, Winnie , Keith's Bennett's mother, keeping the face of the lost child present.

And Godly Play stories also allow these faces of God to shine through. – a God of sadness, of courage, of passion for children.

We see this especially in the Moses story , a story which powerfully demonstrates that God finds children worthy of salvation, and does not want children to die but to live and flourish. Moses live because of the courageous midwives who trick Pharaoh, because of the weeping woman who through the strength of her tears finds a way for her child to flourish. And who is the roused she-bear, perhaps Miriam, perhaps the princess, or perhaps the divine passion of God watching over Moses and helping all of them to work together to allow Moses to become who he is meant to be, through being nurtured and fed by his own mother so that he can grow.

Yet Moses represents something else, he represents a whole people, a people of God who are to be fed and watered by God and nourished and cared for. The divine passion of God extends all the way up to a whole people, children of God.

In Godly Play then we have all the seeds of who the people of God are meant to be. So that's both a privilege and a challenge to us. And as I'm sure you know the powers that be don't often give enough time and support to children's work, and so all we do as weeping women, as courageous midwives and roused she-bears, brings others in the Church face to face with the work and desire of God. It is deep in the roots of Godly Play theology.

PAUSE

In what ways do you think we can help people whose children have died?

What do you think are the signs that children are living a healthy, happy life?

TITLE SLIDE My third proposition is that God finds children worthy of commissioning. (shorten)

ACT

I said that God calls all children into being a physical vocation of growth and development that leads to joy and flourishing and that creates the context for a saying and intellectual and spiritual yes to God. But how does that work?

I find that God commissions children who become aware of his presence in their lives in a variety of different ways and I want to explore some of them.

Samuel and Jesus – children notice things

Jeremiah the prophetic vocation

Adam and Eve – exploration and growth

Commission through others

Commission in context (David. Little servant girl)

Commission to create a kingdom of God fit for children.

SLIDE BOY IN HOUSE But first of all Jesus was a child. We've already talked about him as an unborn child, the Christ child who goes for a ride in a wheelbarrow? How did that child become aware of his commission from God?

In the infancy gospels, the writer or writers speculated about that and came up with the answer that in testing his vocation Jesus must really have been, in the words of Terry Jones, a *very naughty boy*.

Making sparrows on the Sabbath. Jesus plays in the street with the other children, climbs about in people's houses, follows his big brother around, watches his father at work. The Jesus and his mates are mucking around in a house and one of the children falls off the roof and dies. Jesus gets blamed for it, so he resurrects the boy so he can get him out of trouble. Then he tells the mother of the resurrected child to give him some milk.

The Infancy gospels end up with the story of Jesus as a boy in the Temple. The implication perhaps being that this is where he works out what all his powers are for. Now he knows these are not random experiences but part of a purpose.

But there's another reason why I'm interested in the story of Jesus in the Temple as a commissioning.

I see this story and the story of the call as Samuel in the Bible as strongly echoing one another.

Samuel has been with his master in the Temple more or less since he was born and he has grown up in Eli's service. Doubtless Eli has overlooked Samuel, just as he has overlooked what his corrupt family is up to. Eli has been allowing the Temple to be defiled and suddenly he has to notice that Samuel is physically present, a witness to all that's been going on, with functioning eyes and ears and now he's just there in front of Eli mediating God's language to him: what you're doing is not right. I won't turn a blind eye and it's got to stop. In the first GP lecture **Rebecca said that children may express things that are confusing, disturbing or painfully honest** and here we have the Samuel effect to make, as the text says 'the ears tingle'.

I've seen this in Church. (story of reconciliation room)

In fact I saw this quite recently in a church, where it pays not to ignore the presence of children. A young mother (not a churchgoer) came into the church to attend a wedding. When the wedding was over and she was getting ready to leave, one of her two young children asked about the room at the side called the 'Reconciliation Room'. They asked what it said and what it meant, but the mother didn't know. One of the older church members, who had been sitting in front of them, explained that it was a place you could go to talk to the priest about your life. You could tell him about things you had done wrong or that were worrying you. And it was very important to tell the truth.

'Are you going in there now?' the younger child asked the church lady.

'No', she replied.

'Well you should, because you told a lie'

Uncomfortable laughter. 'No I didn't'

'Yes you did. You said to [the bride's mother] "You look lovely". And then straight afterwards you said to [a friend] that she was too fat for that dress.'

.....

Children notice things and they know perfectly well what's going on. And I think of Jesus in the Temple too, watching and seeing all that's gone on. And when much later on in his life, he overturns the tables in outer precincts of the Temple, that he too acts on the instinct he must have had as a child learning and discussing, - that this is a place where people **MUST** have access to God, they must not be cheated, or turned aside by the greed of human beings. **That's another reason why Godly Play is so important.**

And I don't then find it strange that it precisely the praise of children in the Temple: Go Jesus! that the Jewish leaders get so upset about. Jesus knows that children see the truth and are not afraid to speak it. The Samuel effect goes on because God commissions children to speak words of truth against all our power politics and self-interest. When Jeremiah says I can't prophesy because I'm only a young person, God says that doesn't matter -it's you I want to speak my difficult word.

SLIDE ADAM AND EVE Adam and Eve

Most paintings of Adam of Eve show them as adults who don't know it until they've eaten the apple. But I see them more like this. They are, after all, new humans, and they are invited to play, to explore, to delight in and be delighted in, by God. And that is their commission from God.

The Fall is a big deal theologically, but if we see them as God's children I see it as a very serious lesson for these new humans in the experience of growing up. Our children experience it every time they fall off their bikes, break their arm jumping out of a tree, burn themselves on the irresistibly beautiful flame, or eat something delicious that makes them sick. it seems to me that one of the reasons this narrative feels so powerful to us is precisely because it is familiar not just to our minds or our spiritual lives but to our bodies. We have all eaten the forbidden fruit and been sorry afterwards; yet we live in a fallen world and that is how we grow and learn. The vocation from god to be is put together with the commission from God to learn. In both, God goes with us at all times.

SLIDE RUNNING Commission announced through others. The commissioning of children by God also needs recognition and nurture from others. Just as the Bible is full of announcements from angels or others about what children are going to become, so those announcements depend for their fulfilment on parents and communities making it possible for those children to go forward. Olympics. This is another reason why Godly Play is so important to allow children's wondering and dreaming to be encouraged and to see the way possibilities can become realities in things you can touch and handle and change.

SLIDE DAVID: Look at David – another kind of Olympic champion. Commission from context – David doesn't want armour but stones

The point about David is that the gifts he has to defeat Goliath come from his life as a child, not the lives and procedures of adults. David can't be a champion, wearing armour and waving a sword. But David is prepared to accept the commission, because he has gifts honed from his early experiences. He knows how to throw the stones at animals which would hurt the sheep. He knows which stones work best and he is not afraid of large or fierce enemies. As far as he is concerned he already has everything he needs, including the conviction that God is with him and will help him overcome the threat just as he has experienced in his life as a shepherd boy. But David treats Goliath as another lion or bear who is threatening the sheep. This is where he feels comfortable and this is where his spirituality has been honed. Goliath is simply not prepared for the child's reframing of the situation, nor for the prospect of the smooth stones from the wadi which can have such devastating effect.

Children are constantly being urged to grow up, rather than just grow. Yet the story of David and Goliath shows that if children are given the space and time to explore their gifts, then the commission to grow and flourish gives them the tools to prosper in ways we have trouble imagining. Somehow we have to trust children to be children.

SLIDE SERVANT GIRL Commission emerges from complexity – the little servant girl

It doesn't have to be the Olympic champion though, sometimes children can work out their commission from God most effectively as part of a team, sometimes the least important member of a team. The little girl acts as a prophet, prophesying a future in which healing is possible and speaking God-language into the situation. The child, identifying a space in which that God-language can be heard, utters it, and God's word does not ever come back empty. It is through that little child's word that Naaman comes to be healed and God to be glorified. Was it perhaps that response to God in a little child that prompted Jesus to name Naaman as the route through which God was glorified in Luke

SLIDE PLAYGROUND /CHURCH COMMISSION TO BUILD A KINGDOM FIT FOR CHILDREN

Amos says

And I raised up some of your
children to be prophets
and some of your youths to be nazirites.
Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel?
says the Lord.

But you made the nazirites
drink wine
and commanded the prophets,
saying, "You shall not prophesy"

So, I will press you down in your place,
just as a cart presses down
when it is full of sheaves.

Amos 2.11-134.27?

This is a warning to us because another way in which God finds children worthy of commission is that we are ourselves commissioned to build a kingdom fit for children – **and Godly Play is precisely just such a start.**

PAUSE

How do you think we can best nurture children's potential and gifts?

Where do you see children's abilities being stifled or re-shaped to what adults want to happen?

Where in society do you see children being written off if they cannot conform to bench marks and testing?

What do you imagine Jesus would have been like as a child?

TITLE SLIDE My fourth proposition is that God finds children worthy of healing

WHOLE

So: I have said that children are called into being and test that vocation through play; children are to be saved by the tears, courage and passion of God reflected in and through us. God demands justice for children whose lives and vocations are threatened.

When I say that children are found worthy of healing I mean it in two senses.

BABY SLIDE First: children heal the hurt lives of adults and that healing is, in the Bible, mediated through God. It follows on from vocation – God is intimately linked to our biology so having children is described as opening and closing the womb. The barren woman is one who knows the pain of something wrong and her pregnancy is accompanied by a song of joy and thanksgiving. That is a song we need to hear, because those who know how precious their child is open up to the rest of us that reality about children. Keeping that focus helps us realise that it is not a question of what Scripture tells us to do, but what Scripture makes it clear we should not lose sight of, not forget. One of those things is the song of joy that issues from the mouth of the woman whose prayer has been heard and which is sealed in the presence of her child. And that the presence of the precious child in the world is a sign of the reality of God's reconciling work for the whole creation. The healing of a physical, social hurt through the gift of a child teaches us about the much larger reconciling and healing purposes of God. Despite the fact that the world seems unfair and biased and just wrong much of the time, the inhabiting of a sacred space in which the divine message of peace and goodwill can come through is made concrete in the birth of children.

Every child we encounter should carry that song, but do they? Sadly in our society that song is often not heard when it should be.

But if it a child which brings healing into brokenness **Then it makes perfect sense that God should seek to heal the whole world by sending his own Son, as a child, to live and grow among human beings.** Now we can re-read John 1: a healing for the whole universe

Mary utters the song of joy but is not promised happiness – a sword will pierce your soul. [The passion of the Christ]. Healing is joy but not happiness. A lot of people get these things mixed up.

SLIDE SICK CHILD The second sense refers to the healings of children we find in the Bible.

Story: Mother who knew something was wrong

SLIDE ADAM CREATED This is a slide of the creation of Adam, as God breathes him into life. We see the presence of these mothers in some of the most powerful stories of healing. In the stories of Elijah and Elisha , the mother will stop at nothing to get help for their child from the person through whom God works. And the prophet responds with all the divine passion of God for the child to continue to live. There is a giving of the whole physical self in an attempt to bring the child back. The parallels with the primordial act of creation are important; because God's fundamental acts of creation are not just good but good forever. If the broken, fallen world threatens that fundamental reality, then the creative act can be reinvoked to restore it. God wants this. Both Elijah and Elisha hold nothing back, but give of their whole physical and spiritual being in order to allow the power of God to work a healing miracle. The outcome of the healings are also important: through the restoration of the child's life and the giving back of the child to the mother, the truth of God's desire and promise for human beings is made known. Jesus points it out to his hearers in Luke 4.

I want to say something also about Jairus' daughter. First, that there is a sense that nothing on God's earth will stop Jesus getting to the child in the end. When he does get there and she is dead, it is nonetheless to the child that God wants to be, to live, that he speaks. She wakes up and Jesus immediately makes sure that her parents are told to take care of her.

But what are we to make of the woman with the flow of blood who interrupts this narrative, - apart from the dramatic tension, or it is to make sure the miracle is even greater since in the interim she dies, what else can we take from the healing of the woman. In view of all I have said so far about the God of Godly Play, I see the woman with the flow of blood as another manifestation of the dead child. Jesus doesn't just raise the child and forget about her, whatever happens to her, whatever healing she might need in the future, Jesus is there for her. Because God calls us into being for our whole lives, Jesus is there for her her entire life.

It's important that we get that whole life perspective. When in the Bible the disciples can't heal a child in convulsions, it's because they lose the ability to imagine the child as God sees him; they see only the here and now. What Jesus does is to reframe the issue. He looks beyond the immediate into the kingdom reality which mirrors God's desire and gives *that* child to his father.

So all our work with children is about seeing the potential and possibility for that child not just now but for whatever that child will be and our support and nurture and all our prayers really matter.

SYROPHOENICIAN: Why does it matter? It is because **The healed child is a 'sign' of God's justice becoming manifest in the world around us.**

So what are we to make of the Syrophenician woman's daughter? Because Jesus says no. Yet the mother will not go away or give up. Jesus' own compassion and commission, when he is tired, exhausted is brought forth by the divine passion of God mirrored in the foreign woman before him. This tells us that

- Determined advocacy for the child is important
- Persistence

Finally, these narratives offer us a very simple truth. How do we know that God finds children worthy of healing? **Because these children are healed.** The dead child may be buried, lost and forgotten, but the healed child carries in his body every day the reality that God has a desire and purpose for his life which adults cannot and should not deny.

Many children are made sick by the church and many are hurt or actually abused by the church. Yet the passion of God is for their healing. Through Godly Play we have the chance to nurture spiritually healthy children. And Godly Play is a rebuke to any church that says no to children.

PAUSE

What are your own experiences of looking after sick children?

How can we see recovery from sickness as a sign of God's kingdom?

Why do you think Jesus said no to the Syro-Phoenician woman?

What more do we need to do to make sure children are not neglected, cruelly treated or abused?

TITLE SLIDE My final proposition is that God finds children worthy of blessing.

Because of this children mediate the word GRACE to us.

Story: Dick's last resort

PRETTY SLIDE/ANGRY SLIDE Why was Jesus so angry?

Jesus as rejected child. There's some evidence in the narrative that Jesus' own family life was difficult. Given his claims and behaviour he must have brought considerable stigma on his family, especially if people thought he was arrogant or crazy. His family have to keep interceding for him or dragging him away. So I think that when the children were rejected this really struck a chord with Jesus. And how then do we then read Jesus' own emotions within the parable of the Prodigal Son.

But everywhere he goes, Jesus creates family. He calls the disciples, he talks to Nicodemus of being reborn from above. This theological conversation uses the language of (re)birth as a reframing of a person's life and purpose with reference to God. Such a reframing results in a spiritual orientation, through the Spirit, that now surrounds the believer as a new-born person within a loving family, of whom the Abba is God. To find oneself newly born in such a family is to discover a spirituality that is life-affirming, not life-denying, as Jesus goes on to explain (John 3.16-21).

He gathers about him guests and hosts of all kinds who become his brothers and sisters in a mirror of the world as God wants it to be,

God finds children worthy of blessing, of being given time, acceptance and privilege. Yet in the human world, some adults decide who can and cannot have access to Jesus, pushing some people to the bottom of the pile, protecting his honour and status and deeming him too important to deal with mere children. I see this as opening Jesus' own personal wounds and theological conviction about the love of the Father prompting him to use the event to make a powerful statement about a world where God's purposes would be paramount.

The children encounter Jesus' physical reality; the children encounter Jesus's loving embrace; the children are blessed by Jesus repeatedly; there is powerful affirmation in the life of the child and the child is privileged in front of all the adults. All of these things have both social and theological importance. So every child who is excluded from school, every 'difficult' child, every child who goes off the rails, every adolescent stomping off in a huff, every child who brings 'shame' on the family, all these are pronounced 'good' by Jesus in the act of blessing. There is no child anywhere who deserves less than the unconditional love of God, and if we want to share God's kingdom then we too must find ways to allow such children to come to us and be blessed and to discern where children can find and know themselves blessed.

This tells us that the act of blessing is life-extending; blessing creates better social conditions; blessing opens up a burgeoning and flourishing spiritual life; Blessing allows people to see the essential goodness of creation and to know that God is at the heart of it.

Children need a space in which they can explore the encounter with the Abba who is God. But that space is so difficult to find. Too often, there are adults in the way, crowding out the space and hiding God from view. Children might obtain glimpses of God perhaps through the legs of the adults, but to have a complete opportunity depends on the adults realising that, often, they are in the way.

So in the new Testament we find the early church as a young family of brothers and sisters growing together in Christ.

SLIDE PLAYGROUND story Spanish playground

But why should this story not be a picture of Pentecost.

Like my children and their Spanish friends, their origins and languages, status, cultural baggage and customs all dissolve in the common commitment to be together, and because the Spirit urges us to play together. There is something of Pentecost in a group of children playing or falling about

laughing. Those looking at the disciples thought they were drunk; here were adults expressing themselves like children, filled with joy and mutual experience. It is not surprising then that in Acts 2.14ff Peter refers to the prophecy of Joel 'sons and daughters shall prophesy and young men see visions'. The Spirit-filled community recalls to us the enthusiasm and boundless possibility that is continually offered to us by the young: 'Little children, let us love, not in words or speech, but in truth and action' (1 John 3.18). If the world ends suddenly and Jesus returns, then his family will be instantly recognisable and distinctive. The church should be a graced community, one in which the children know themselves blessed and held by Jesus. I read 1 Corinthians 13.11 as a matter of regret, that Paul senses that the ending of 'being' like a child in adulthood has caused the spiritual sense to dim. We will regain it fully when as we stand before God like a child and see him face to face.

Finally

OLD WOMAN Children teach us how to die – as an act of blessing and an act of grace.

Why? Because I said that God calls us into embodied being and calls us out of this life into the next.

That God does not want any child to die but for us to flourish

That God commissions us for a purpose

That God's glory is revealed through healing, even a final healing

And that God finds everything that he has imagined and made to be good, now and for forever.

This is true not just in this life but in the eschatological reality but how shall we make that transition, fighting against his call, against his commission, against the idea that death can be healing.

Jesus says that we can only enter the kingdom as a child, and so we have to remember the child we were to enter into the life we inherit. There has to vulnerability, trust in our essential and final powerlessness, but the knowledge and conviction that we are loved and that on the other side of our advent the loving parent waits for us to treasure us. At the end of our lives it is as children that God dries all tears, blesses, heals and saves us and calls us into life. Kingdom as playground where there is always room for more children. The eschatological vision is a place where children do not die.

PAUSE

SLIDE CHILD

That means that we can also see Godly Play as providing a glimpse of the world to come; it has a prophetic and eschatological dimension. It can be one of the few modes of being church that allows us to see what God intends for us in heaven.

Pause

What 'families' do you feel you belong to? What identifies them as family?

If you 'count your blessings' what are they?

What more could we do to help rejected children in today's society?

What could we do in church/school/the home to bless and privilege children?

DISCUSSION:

choose one of the propositions. You can use one of the questions I've suggested or talk about something else if you like and then we'll get feedback.

Conclusion

- God calls all children into life.
- God does not want any child to die.
- God invites all children to be part of the divine will for creation and delights in them.
- God wants children to be whole and happy.
- God's blessing on children privileges them before adults.

Godly Play: allows children to test their vocation through being themselves and through play

Godly Play allows children to explore that God wants them to live fully and to flourish. Godly Play is life affirming, not life denying.

Godly Play allows children to say yes to God in a variety of ways

Godly Play invites children into wholeness and allows them to become agents of healing others

Godly Play assures children of God's blessing, their place in the goodness of creation and accords them the privilege of their place with Christ.