

A sermon for St Nicholas tide... to celebrate the launch of Godly Play UK

(This is an extended version of a sermon preached at St Nicholas Cathedral Newcastle
8th December 2007)

Gospel reading

Mark 10 vv13-16

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them.

But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant, and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them and blessed them.

It's a privilege and pleasure to be here today to join in the Patronal Festival celebrations of St. Nicholas. This also an opportunity to give thanks for the work of Godly Play in the North and to ask God's blessing as we mark a new chapter in the life of Godly Play UK.

We held a sister celebration on Thursday at Westminster Abbey and as then I have message of prayerful support from many different parts of the world. People in the United States, Germany Finland Norway and Australia and many other countries are praying with us now .Thank God for the great Communion of Saints..

There has been such a richness today already in this worship, a richness of the story of the Holy Family, these wonderful sculptures .a rich feast of music, images and symbols as we gather in this ancient Cathedral of St. Nicholas to celebrate this great feast...

I'm reminded of the process in Godly Play where we put stories and symbols side by side to see what they might say to each other.

So what might St Nicholas and the Gospel passage we've just heard and Godly Play have to say to each other and us today.

PASSION

Well one thing that might connect them is the word PASSION

I arrived on the train last night but had the privilege of catching the last half of your performance of Benjamin Britten's Cantata of St. Nicholas. The sound was incredible and for the first time I was so struck by the passionate nature of the music and singing. There was the sublimely simple but stunningly beautiful musical passage as the choir sang:

We keep his memory alive in the legends that our children and their children's children treasure still.

Then the three boys who have been killed for food are brought to life by Nicholas and they walked down the centre aisle to sing their Alleluia.

The power of their voices sent the hairs on the back of my neck on end...

Rebecca Nye reminded us in Westminster Abbey on Thursday of the tradition that even in infancy Nicholas was passionate about the faith... so that even in infancy he is

supposed to have fasted and refused to drink milk from his mother's breast on Wednesday and Friday!

Eric Crozier in his words for the cantata reflects this as the choir sings that ...

Nicholas was born in answer to prayer he leapt forth from his mother's womb and cried God be glorified...

.....and later the choir sing of how as an infant he climbed into the font by himself and asked to be baptised...

There's some very passionate language and feelings in the gospel reading today.

The passion isn't so apparent as we read this passage in a liturgical setting.

We are told simply that the disciples rebuked them....

But what might that really mean.

Here are some other words from a thesaurus

reprimand reprove.. censure... reproach... take to task.. haul over the coals... scold.... admonish... give a talking to... telling off ... lecture ... slap on the wrist.

This isn't about being polite... I have a vision of physical pushing and shoving here.

Did a young child who was carried pull Peter's beard or hair or nose?

Were the children hit roughly, pushed away?

Did a child kick a disciple in the shins?

I think that in reality it was a pretty ugly situation.

It's very passionate.

Passion is often a quality not usually associated with nice people...

Passion is often not very polite.

Then we have the indignation, the passion of Jesus.

Again the words in the thesaurus give us very strong emotions:-

... righteous anger... resentment... offence... annoyance... fury... crossness... ire... wrath... vitriol boil with rage fume... to be livid...

My guess is that the language could well have been very blue and the physical contact very strong....

Did Jesus grab one of the disciples by the collar and pull them away from the children?

What tone of voice was used to say:

Let the children come to me Do not try to stop them?

My guess it wasn't liturgical in tone.

It would be interesting to see what would happen if these words were shouted and screamed, spoken through clenched teeth, spoken with vitriol, rage, wrath, righteous anger.

Oh these people who work with Godly Play are so passionate, it's a process that goes deeply into the soul and leaves us with such strong feelings and emotions

Today I'd like to give thanks for your passion for Godly Play.

But I'd also like to apologise to all our long suffering friends and family who have to endure this passion and enthusiasm. Who roll their eyes as we tell another story of how it's changed our lives and who have to suffer endless searching in shops for appropriate boxes, and baskets.

Rebecca and I often joke with one another.

Why are we travelling hundreds of miles just to push pieces of wood and felt around the floor!!!!

But then the mystery happens!

WHICH GAME IS PLAYED

Some of my wondering as I play the side by side game is to wonder about what games are being played in the gospel story.

The disciples are playing the powerful game of the gatekeeper. I've noticed that some people after some introductions to Godly Play mistakenly talk about the threshold person being the door KEEPER.

The role of the door PERSON should be one of welcomer, one who enables movement between one place and another

The word KEEPER for me has game-like qualities of exclusion and prevention.

'I'll decide who will come in and go out...'

This is certainly the game the disciples are playing...

The children are seen as a hindrance, a nuisance.

They are objectified, problems, obstacles to what is really important.

They are non beings, the ones with no voice... After all they are JUST children!

The legends of Nicholas are strong in his role as pastor, pastor to those who were often neglected and left to life's abuse. The famous story of the girls who are to be sold into prostitution is such an example. They are to be used as objects by others, but they are rescued because he sides with the powerless and saves them by leaving three bags of gold as their dowry.

Jesus' indignation, his passion, means that he chooses to play another game, the game of siding with the powerless

Something is at stake here, it's not optional, it's a matter of life and death

Godly Play also plays an intentional game, of choosing process rather than closed systems, of asking open rather than closed questions, of opting for mystery rather than clear cut answers, of valuing not knowing as well as knowing, of choosing community and relationship as fundamental values for spiritual nurture and growth.

LANGUAGE MATTERS

I've just been reading John Irving's novel: *A Prayer for Owen Meaney* and I love this quote towards the end of the novel.

Watch out for people who call themselves religious; make sure you know what they mean – make sure they know what you mean.

Language matters, and Nicholas, so the legend says, was one of those who at the Council of Nicaea was strongly vocal in getting the right formulary of language. So insistent was he that he was prepared to have fisticuffs over it.

I'm certainly not advocating that we behave in a similar way, but it does make me wonder about the language systems that seem to be operating in this gospel story.

Adults prefer words, they love the logicity, the apparent preciseness and comfort that words bring, the right word in the right time.

So Jesus' language to the disciples is this system.

Let the children come to me, do not try to stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

On the other hand the preferred language system for a young child is not words but the language of the body, of gesture, of the non verbal, and it is this language system that Jesus employs with the children.

And he took them in his arms, laid his hands upon them and blessed them.

This is experiential language, a gesture of tenderness, a language of sensuality.

My big wonder is: How long does it take an adult to move from indignation to tenderness, and for it to make a difference?

Imagine the confusion for a young child .At one moment you see a wrathful livid adult and then the same adult is offering cuddles and caress!

Perhaps Jesus was different but my belief in his humanity makes me wonder that it probably it took time for him to really bless. Did the children help in some way? Did a small child pull at his robe and smile? Did he play some games first? Did the children play a part in blessing him so that he in turn could offer them some authentic tenderness?

The two language systems are in contrast in this passage.

There are the harsh almost impossible words to the adults and then the tender embracing nonverbal system given to the children.

Hans Ruedi Weber, who wrote a seminal study on the childhood passages in the gospels to celebrate the United Nations International Year of the Child in 1979, suggests that this non verbal action could well have had a profound impact upon the adults who were present .

He suggests that they could have made a connection with a contemporary hope about the Messiah.

Popular rabbinic teaching at the time promoted that Israel would be restored ...

...when God embraces them, presses them to his heart and kisses them; thus bringing them into the life of the world to come.

This blessing is not the same as the liturgical pat on the head at the communion rail. It's so much more profound, so deep. It is a deep sign of the messianic kingdom. It is something about the eternal power of the infant who wants to embrace, which was powerfully symbolised as the story of the Holy Family was told at the beginning of this service.

This intimacy of language is one that Godly Play promotes.

The marrying of both language systems, the verbal and non verbal is integral.

For so many children their lives are confused because adults say one thing and do another. I can hear the words of my aunt saying... 'Do as I say not as I do,' and even as a child thinking something's not quite right here.

SAFE SPACE

Linked to this idea of language is the deep need to create some safe space for the children.

The embrace is unconditional, is unqualified, is unreserved.

The children do nothing except be children. They are not good children or naughty children. They are not innocent or exemplify a natural confidence

They are just children. They are. To be or not to be that's the question!

Their vulnerability is suggested, as the passage says they had to be brought to Jesus. It appears that they didn't have much choice.

In the chaos and rejection of rejection and abuse, Jesus creates a protected space for the child.

Many icons of Nicholas represent him with his arms outstretched and the folds of his cloak creating a protecting shield for a group of children

Rowan Williams in *Lost Icons* has spoken strongly about the important task of the adult in protecting boundaries and spaces so children can be children. His observation is that for many adults we fail miserably in the task.

One of the famous legends of Nicholas uses extreme language and symbol to make the same point.

A time of famine has forced communities into cannibalism.

It's a familiar theme in the Lamentation of Jeremiah

The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children. (Lam. 4v10)

This is terrifying wondering..

In what ways do we as communities devour our children?

The choir in the Cantata lament that

Timothy Mark and John are gone, are gone, are gone...

The legend goes on to tell of how unawares Nicholas, who is about to eat a plate of human meat, hears the cries of the pickled boys.

It's an extreme story and Nichols creates a miracle of restoration, of their re-instatement to the community. No wonder the response is

Alleluia.

Godly Play has at its heart this deep desire to create a place of safety, a boundaried place of trust for the child, a place to value silence, to think, to value vulnerability and to honour difference and diversity.

A RADICAL ALTERNATIVE

Hans Ruedi Weber suggests that the gospel passage is not about the nature of childhood.

The action of Jesus towards the children is a profound image of the nature of God.

It is an action of gratuitous generosity. God pleases to embraces us for no other reason that it pleases God so to do.

It is quite unreasonable and perverse.

It's so irrational.

It is UN REASON.

It offers such a radical alternative to the usual way in which we behave and act. The accepted norms are turned upside down.

There are always those moments, usually towards the end of the 2nd day or the beginning of the 3rd day, of a teacher accreditation course when many people suddenly say

'Oh my goodness this is not just about telling stories to children.

This is about how we should be with one another... This is so counter cultural!'

Well at the end of this service Bishop I'm afraid you are going to be turned out of your Episcopal throne because this cathedral still enacts the ancient St. Nicholas day tradition of the Boy Bishop.

For a short span of time the usual power worlds will be turned upside down and we will catch a tiny glimpse of what it might mean to put a child at the centre.

And so the child's voice at the beginning of Benjamin Britten's St Nicholas Cantata rings out loud and clear.....

GOD BE GLOIFIED

Benjamin Britten 1948: **St. Nicholas : A Cantata**: Boosey and Hawkes
Eric Crozier – Libretto

Hans Ruedi Weber 1979: **Jesus and the Children**: World Council of Churches

John Irving 1989: **A Prayer for Owen Meany** :Bloomsbury

Rowan Williams 2000: **Lost Icons** : T&T Clark Edinburgh

Revd Peter Privett
International Regional Co-ordinator for Godly Play
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