

Westminster Abbey Godly Play Lecture

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Poets Corner, Westminster Abbey

Peter has told the story of how Godly Play came here, but my 'wondering' takes its inspiration from where we are here and now. In other words : The resonance Godly Play has with this place and this day.

Godly Play and Poetry

It is wonderful and somehow so appropriate that we are here, in Poet's corner...a place that epitomises the celebration of language in a religious setting. But I am intrigued by what a generous understanding of 'language' this is.

So, wondering 'what do I like best about us being here tonight?', I'm struck by how broadly the category 'poetry' and 'poet' has been interpreted in this ancient English Abbey.

- For example, in addition to poets there are also musicians remembered here –such as Handel , and novelists, such as Dickens.
- Some poets here, like Chaucer, even rejected the category of 'poet' to describe themselves and their work.
- And the breadth is also evident in the inclusion of diverse accents and variants – its not just British voices, but also Longfellow and TS Eliot, ie American poetic voices. And some American *influence* too- there's a story that Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, has the former US president - Jimmy Carter- to thank for his inclusion in Poet's corner – after he was surprised to find no memorial to him. To include Dylan Thomas meant seeing beyond his well-known and not so 'Christian' lifestyle.

These examples of how generously 'the language of poetry' has been interpreted finds direct resonance with the generous approach Godly Play has in regard to religious language. And this also chimes with the openhearted mindset Godly Play urges us to adopt in order to appreciate

the diverse ways children **use** religious language to make meaning in their lives.

Specifically, Godly Play takes very seriously the limits and dangers of using verbal language to convey religious meaning. It understands that religious language is much more than just the conventionally verbal. In fact, it understands that religious language is misused if it is reduced to being language of statements, propositions of belief and an exercise in intellectual mastery of religious ideas.

Just as in poetry, where meaning and feeling can arise not merely from words but as much from rhythm, shape, rhyme, and in what is not said, Godly Play gives a very prominent place to the rich **non-verbal** aspects of religious language : ritual, gesture, action and silence, and the way children fluently 'speak' in these ways to make meaning themselves. For many of us, the most exciting thing about Godly Play is that it resets the expectation that engagement with the sacred should prompt us, at any age, to attempt to articulate our sense of mystery rather than mastery.

One of the appealing features of Godly Play is that it helps to underscore what research has also shown, namely that children do not begin as empty vessels, nor are they spiritually dormant until they demonstrate verbal grasp of religious ideas. Uniquely perhaps, GodlyPlay provides a way to take advantage of the fact that children are often the true **experts in these non-verbal** , broadly poetic uses of language, a way to take their natural spiritual capacities seriously.

How then is Godly Play like the inclusive air of this place, not limiting itself to local British poetry, but rather celebrating all kinds of diverse accents, dialects and talents?

Well, Godly Play represents an undertaking to include children's accents and dialects in terms of religious meaning making. This entails a deep exercise in communication, which requires everyone involved, regardless of age or knowledge, to a never-ending process of learning to hear and attempting to understand one another – in whatever way we truly express ourselves.

This, like poetry, is about enabling truthful communication, working towards the spiritual virtue of authenticity . This poetic ideal – that poetry should be 'an inspired truthful utterance, and not a game played with

words and ideas' , urges us to refrain from using religious language at any age to say things primarily to impress, persuade or explain. Yet often that has been the aim of religious education and been the outcome 'measure' of children's engagement with faith. Godly Play is contributing to seeing the short sightedness of this in its broader influences on the culture of spiritual education.

Of course, like poets, children may express things that are confusing, disturbing or painfully honest. However, Godly Play tries to help children grasp that Christian language is meant to help them speak from the heart, in their ways, in the dialects of childhood– which might be in play, in pushing the boundaries of the ridiculous as well as the existential, and in laughter and in silence. It would be wonderful to imagine that one day there might even be, wherever there are sacred places, not only poets' corners but also inspiring corners dedicated to children, to their spiritual processing, and the authentic, even prophetic, quality of their accents.

(This is of course a central tenet of Godly Play practice, the creation of sacred space, physically and emotionally, that supports how children come close to God and how God comes close to children. I wonder how much longer we will go on trying to leave out that part, -the significance of sacred space in children's spiritual engagement-, in the vain hope that our words speak louder than our actions?)

But, all this attention to the non-verbal, to unfamiliar accents, to the - language of space and action, is not meant to imply that if we left out traditional religious verbal language altogether, children's spirituality would be served better. Coleridge described poetry 'as the best words in the best order' and this resonates with the great care Godly Play takes with verbal religious language. Godly Play 'lessons' represent almost 4 decades of Jerome Berryman's classroom research and his search to find a way to put the best words in the best order.

But, like a poet, Jerome Berryman has approached this task as much more than a question of vocabulary, and also as more than a question of theological syntax. His work shows what a difference it makes, perhaps especially to children, when close attention is paid also to the linguistic

music and the shape of religious expression – when the music and shape of our expression supports what is said. It's a liturgical principle after all – concurring with Debussy's comment about music being really about 'the space *between* the notes' – Godly Play is insistent that having 'space to wonder and respond' is as essential ingredient for spiritual communication as the stimulus itself.

Godly Play and St Christopher

In addition to all the poetic inspiration here, there's a painting, behind me, that also set off some characteristic Godly Play wondering for me.

The wall painting here shows St Christopher carrying the Christ Child . This is a wonderful story of the allegedly giant-sized man who, searching for what *his* work should be, was led to a dangerous river crossing. Here, his size and strength were put to good use, providing a safe way for smaller people to cross the dangerous water: he carried them.

Until one day, carrying a child, he was perplexed by the curious **weight** of this small person. Of course, it transpired this child was the *Christ* Child, heavy not in his **own** right, but with the sins of the whole world.

Many of you here know at first hand some of the dangerous water crossings we help children to navigate. Certainly to help a child journey from her own intuitive sense of the spiritual and sacred, into the language of a specific religious community – can be a treacherous passage. Very often it seems as if the natural language and insight of childhood spirituality is swept away in the fast current of religious teaching and learning, so that when the child reaches the further bank, they have no connection with the experience they had earlier in their spiritual journey. It is as if that formative kind of experience did not count, and by implication as if a large part of their childhood self does not count either.

I believe that one of Godly Play's *most important* contributions in the UK has been to provide a way to bridge, or at least offer a safer passage, across this.

Crucially Godly Play recognises careful choices of well researched methods and resources are only secondary factors in providing this bridge. **Godly Play puts the necessity of building and maintaining trusting relationships** first, as the *foundation* of Christian spiritual formation.

This is more than rhetoric. This should challenge our practice. It affects how the children and their experience are treated. For instance ensuring that children are valued for being, not just what they do or say. It also challenges us to be critically alert to any explicit or insidious practices that coerce or cajole children into spiritual engagement – rather than the relationship being one of invitation.

Putting the principles of trust and relationship FIRST also challenges how the adults leading Godly Play view their role – as trusting servants of the stories they tell, espousing a relationship of humility and wonder towards the material, rather than one of mastery. The words ‘I learned to trust...’ are found on so many of the evaluations that participants complete at the end of our courses – I think this indicates that what might have been a professional process of developing new skills turns out to be, more importantly, a spiritual process for many.

What *I like* about this painting is the attitude of the Christ child – reaching out *his* hand to give St *Christopher* a blessing. This is not just about the adult’s task to help a child on *his or her* way, a one way street, it is much more mutual.

It seems that when our ways of relating consistently strive for this deep quality of trust, a child calls out something within us. We relate to not only this child or that child, but what Karl Rahner calls ‘the abiding reality’ of childhood itself, our own and one another’s created nature as a child, and according Jesus comments, even Jesus and the one who sent him. Many ‘ordinary’ encounters and tasks are full of sacramental opportunity, for the adult as much as for the child, for the ‘teacher’ as much as the ‘pupil’. The ridiculous, wonderful logic of the beatitudes is in this kind of air. It is also one of the most exciting and common responses Godly Play teachers make - this way of working with children provides the adult leaders with unexpected spiritual nourishment and rich blessings too, in many cases turning around feelings of burn out towards their vocation or work with children . It is as if our own inner child is called out to play again, perhaps that part of ourselves that we were disconnected from when we crossed that dangerous water. The playful presence of our

inner child may be the most useful measure of genuine Godly Play, a check against slipping into practice that merely has the outward signs of this approach.

Godly Play and St Nicholas

But finally, we are not just in this place with its poets and its paintings, we are here on this day: St Nicholas day. There is clearly a great deal of poetic licence in the St Nicholas legend – his saintliness was supposedly evident in his spiritual practice even as a wordless child – he abstained from his mother’s breast milk on Wednesdays and Fridays! I hasten to add, thanks in part to Godly Play, these days there is a more enlightened view of the ways children’s spirituality can be evident.

However, In St Nicholas day traditions of the Middle Ages, there is the subversive Godly play of electing a ‘boy bishop’ who might preach, and, who with other children as his accolytes, would assume priestly duties including visiting parishes to bestow blessings and receive gifts.

In his recent book, *The Invention of Childhood*, Hugh Cunningham suggests that a significant factor in the Puritan decision to abolish this practice, was the unacceptable idea that *children could* give blessings, and of course the objectionable quality of playfulness the whole event permitted.

What was lost when this tradition was abolished was a structured, safely contained opportunity - in fact a season from December 6th to 28th in some places- for children to explore, in a spirit of playfulness, some of the most difficult challenges of human existence – i.e. the exercise of power, responsibility and benevolence, *through* religious language – verbal and non-verbal.

I like to think that Godly Play goes some way to reclaiming that opportunity. Crucially Godly Play **avoids** doing this by thrusting children prematurely and irreversibly into adult roles for our entertainment, nor by default as is the case when the adults seem unable to carry out mature pastoral care for the young because they are still seeking to have their own childish needs met. (as Rowan Williams discusses in *Lost Icons*). Godly Play practitioners need to be alert to the possible tensions here then – it *can* call out the inner child in the adult to play, but this requires

considerable maturity, it should not be at the expense of being in service to the needs of the children.

So how does Godly Play give us back the lost qualities of the St Nicholas season tradition? Clearly Godly Play supports the connection between the playful and the profound. It recognises children's need to wrestle with existential concerns in their own ways, as well with awareness of the ways people have wrestled with these things in the past – in the stories and actions of our tradition. And it offers children a clear threshold in and out of all this, mindful of their vulnerability to be overwhelmed and their need for a safe enough, protected time and space to do that, as well as being mindful and inspired by their spiritual capacity to dig deep.

We are all indebted to the originator of Godly Play, Jerome Berryman, in many ways a St Nicholas figure himself, for the gift of Godly Play. And, like many of the best gifts, I expect we will enjoy many more years of discovering further reasons to be thankful for it. I am certain the future of this project, the further unwrapping of this present, is going to be a really exciting collaborative adventure for us all.

Rebecca Nye 6th December 2007