

The Voice of the Good Shepherd in Godly Play

The Godly Play room at Holy Trinity, North Ormesby was created in 2006. Why? North Ormesby is an Urban Parish near the centre of Middlesbrough, child poverty is 55% and there are many challenges for children growing up in this neighbourhood. We arrived in a parish with no children in the church and no strong links with the local community primary school.

We wanted to offer something good to the children, something that we hoped would nurture them, and provide a safe space for them to discover more about themselves, about community and about God. So, for eight years now we have welcomed children from the local community primary school each week for Godly Play. We also share Godly Play in church, as we have an ever-growing number of children and families coming along on Sundays.

Many wonderful things have happened in the past eight years, but the thing that has stood out over and over again, with all of children we work with has been the huge significance of the environment we welcome them into within Godly Play.

Whilst working with a class from the local primary school a couple of years ago, we were wondering about the Good Shepherd. During the wondering one child said " I can hear the voice of the Good Shepherd when I am in the Godly Play room." The conversation continued... could he hear the Good Shepherd in the stories? No, he said emphatically, I can hear his voice all the time in the Godly Play room.... in everything.

His response has lead us to wonder ... to consider how powerful the environment and the unspoken things we often refer to in Godly Play really are. I've spent time thinking about the parable of the Good Shepherd and what it is saying about how the children respond in Godly Play.

The Good Shepherd knows each of his sheep by name.

At the beginning of each session each child is welcomed by name, the doorkeeper spends time with each child individually, using their name, chatting about how they are and so much more. That individual attention is so important for the children, it's possible to almost see the children grow as they enjoy those intimate moments of feeling known, and loved and welcomed.

He shows them the way to the good grass....

The carpet in our Godly Play room is deliberately green! It helps us to always remember that it is a place where the children should be able to find the good grass, a place to be nurtured and fed through sharing, discovering and wondering, all in a place where everything is designed to be *good* for children. We have witnessed so many times that the children feel safe to enjoy the stories, explore what the story is saying to them, and connect with their own lives.

He shows them the way to the cool, still, fresh water....

Outside the windows of our Godly Play room we have created a garden with a water feature, which gently trickles during the sessions. The children will often look at it, and it reminds us that we are creating a space that is gentle and calm and where the pace is unhurried. The children who come love being in Godly Play, more than once children have said "I wish I could live here all the time."

When there are places of danger... I show them the way to go through...

The places of danger have been very real in our wondering and in the children's response time - in their work with the stories and what they have expressed in their art. The children of our parish live in a harsh, urban environment and they face many challenges in their everyday lives. The Godly Play room has become a safe space to explore those difficult places, and somehow find a way to discover the Good Shepherd is there too.

When the lost sheep is found I invite my friends to have a great feast....

Feasting together – how special it is when we share a feast together, celebrating the good things and sharing the not so good things. This is maybe a rare thing for many children, where meals are not often shared at home. We have enjoyed feasting and sharing together so very much.

We are fortunate to have a beautiful Godly Play room, which feels very important in a community with little green space, surrounded by boarded up windows, razor wire and graffiti. We knew when we created the room we wanted it to be a beautiful, safe space. I think we are still discovering what that means... and learning to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd in all that we do.

In more recent years the local Roman Catholic School has now created a Godly Play room in their school chapel. Now every child in North Ormesby enjoys Godly Play – which is "wonder- full."

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