

Contentfulness, freedom and trust

I'm Josh, a member of the Holywell Community, an Anglican 'new monastic' community in the spirit of the Rule of St Benedict based at St Mary's Priory in Abergavenny, Wales.

Recently, I was supported by the Anglican congregations of Abergavenny, and by Godly Play UK, to attend the three-day core training at Llantarnam Abbey in Cwmbran. It was a spiritually rewarding time and I am looking forward to putting what I've learned into practice in both in Abergavenny and when I return to my native New Zealand. I'm very grateful to everyone who contributed anything towards allowing me to attend the training!

Three things stuck out to me about the Godly Play approach:

- its contentfulness,
- the freedom it provides to its participants,
- and the trust in the power of the Christian tradition that it embodies.

I'll briefly expand on each of these features of Godly Play in this short reflection.

Contentfulness

I was given the task of telling the Godly Play version of story of the Babylonian exile and of leading the 'wondering' which followed. Having set the scene of the story in the desert, we find the Judeans in Jerusalem, with the temple and walls intact, secure in the knowledge that God's presence uniquely dwells in that temple. They then undergo the failed invasion of the Assyrians, the successful invasion of the Babylonians, the exile of many to Babylon, their realisation that God exists in this 'strange and foreign land', and the return of many of the exiles with Ezra and Nehemiah.

The most obvious bit of 'contentfulness' is just how much knowledge of the Biblical narrative is conveyed by Godly Play stories. This is not a low-content approach to children's ministry. But this content is conveyed in a way which encourages a deeper engagement than one would get from simply memorising Bible facts (not that there's anything wrong with memorisation!). This comes out most clearly in the 'wondering' which follows the story.

Once the story has been told, we enter a period of wondering. In the sacred story genre, of which 'Exile and Return' is an example, the storyteller has four main prompts to use: 'I wonder what part of this story you liked best?'; 'I wonder what part is most important?'; 'I wonder where you are in the story or what part of the story is about you?'; and 'I wonder if there is any part of the story we can leave out and still have all the story we need?'

The creation of links between what we read in the Scriptures and our own lives and situations is not secondary. Scripture is not read simply to learn what happened in the past. At least, it is not read as scripture if we're just looking for information about the past. To engage with Scripture as Scripture is to find God, ourselves, and the situations which are on our hearts within it.

Wondering, in Godly Play, is where deep engagement with the story and with its links with ourselves comes out. In our group (not children, mind you, but fully engaging with the story nonetheless), many interesting thoughts came out in our wondering about the story. I'll mention two.

First, the Judean's recognition of the presence of God in Babylon is presented as follows: "Slowly, God's people began to understand that God was in this place, too. God's presence came to them as they gathered to read the scriptures, to tell the old stories, and to pray." This could be 'where you

are' in the story, or it could be that this recognition holds out hope in a seemingly hopeless situation. We wondered about these times in our own lives and in the lives of those that we minister to.

Second, a connection between the story and current events was made. During the story a large chain is dropped across a desert landscape with quite a satisfying 'thud'. It's an intense moment in the story. This moment was the catalyst for reflection on the importance of homeland to some Jewish people and on how the story helps to make sense of current conflict in the Middle East.

Both were moments in which something of the deep content of the story of the Babylonian exile came out in wondering.

Freedom

The time of wondering also brings out the *freedom* which Godly Play allows. While certain connections are encouraged by the stories, and between stories, the storyteller does not come into the session with a list of ideas that have to be touched on in the session.

This is part of the 'play' of Godly Play. Play is done for its own sake rather than *in order to* achieve some other goal. As it happens, we do learn all sorts of thing in play, but we play for its own sake rather than in order to educate ourselves. The freedom of play is to not be constrained by the need to learn some particular skill or fact or the need to 'do something useful' with our time.

One of my tasks while studying philosophy at university was managing tutorial sessions. Many of these presented themselves as free discussions – but the purpose of preparing students to write successful essays or perform well in exams often undermined this freedom. This difference stuck out to me while I led the wondering during core training.

In Berryman's *Teaching Godly Play*, wondering is distinguished from the Socratic method by the fact that, in one case, the teacher asking the questions knows the correct answer to the question or knows where the line of questioning is leading. Wondering is different. As Berryman puts it: 'If you think you already know the "answer" to a wondering question, you are not *wondering!*' (*Teaching Godly Play*, p. 53)

In a full session, response time follows the wondering. Participants are invited to continue their personal response to the story by playing with the components of the story itself, by engaging in some kind of art and craft, or just by thinking to themselves about the story. This is a opportunity for further freedom of response.

One concern people in the wider world have about Christian education is that it is a kind of 'brainwashing'. This concern often comes from people who haven't had any direct experience with Christian education, but sometimes it comes from people who've had particularly unpleasant experiences. There is also the much more subtle concern about 'brainwashing' ourselves.

I have no problem at all with directly teaching propositions or with the use of things like catechisms. But there is something to worry about in processes which seem on the outside to be free, but in which certain conclusions are being aimed at. For instance, we might start with something we want to believe and then reach around for reasons to believe it. The conclusion is fixed, so the intellectual process we're engaged in is not really free even if it might feel that way.

The freedom in Godly Play that I've been reflecting on is one way of mitigating the concern about 'brainwashing'. The stories are told and the participants can do what they want with them. This, in turn, relies on a trust that the Holy Trinity will 'come and play' (*Teaching Godly Play*, pp. 42-43). We

don't fix the conclusions, but we trust and hope that the participants will come to have a strong and personal ownership of their Christian faith.

Trust

The combination of deep content and freedom requires a high level of trust in the truth of the Christian tradition and in its power to enable us to cope with our 'existential limits' (*Teaching Godly Play*, 46).

The stories are carefully written with children in mind. 'Trust in the Christian tradition' doesn't mean acting out the most grisly scenes from Judges with wooden blocks in a sandpit and hoping for the best! The central stories of the people of God are conveyed at an appropriate level of depth and the participants are invited to freely wonder about and respond to them.

The idea that our children's ministry should involve recognition that children are aware (perhaps vaguely) of 'existential limits' is an appealing aspect of the Godly Play approach. What Berryman means by 'existential limits' are things like the fact that we and those we know will die, that we are always in some sense alone, and our need to find some kind of meaning in our experience. He also talks about the limits of 'being' and 'knowing', so presumably the fact that we can never attain absolute certainty or knowledge is also an existential limit. (This fact of uncertainty - and the associated fear of error - is probably the limit that has caused me the most angst in my life!)

Dealing with these issues is something which all religious traditions try to do. Godly Play has a particular set of stories and games which it offers us in answer to these 'limits'. By offering these stories to the children in the setting of a Godly Play session, a safe place is provided when they can assimilate these stories and test them against their own experience of these limits. God is invited to do the rest.

In 'Exile and Return', God is found despite the fall of the Temple. This invites response which might concern the fear of alienation or aloneness, or of one's family being uprooted and moved somewhere else. The promise of return and restoration is also present along with times of waiting and hoping. The story is also linked with other Godly Play stories and thereby taken up into the whole sweep of the Christian story, the promised Messiah, the resurrection, and the promise of future restoration.

This focus on 'existential limits' does not mean we are uninterested in the *truth* of the claims Christianity makes. As religious claims - claims upon which a life can be built - the existential dimension is deeply important for their truth. If Christianity proved to be something that life *could not* be built on, we would then have reason to think that it *isn't true*. Jesus tells us to come unto him and he will carry our burdens. If it turns out he can't, well then we've got some evidence against Christianity!

To engage in Godly Play is to trust that the Christian tradition does carry truth and the God is actively present in the process. This trust is not just for the sake of the children, it is for the storyteller as well. In telling a story and participating in the wondering, the storyteller is engaged in the same experiment that the children are.

This testing of my own faith during the core training was part of the spiritual value of core training. The training is like a retreat. You run through a huge number of stories in the three days and have two full Godly Play sessions led by the trainers. These are spiritually intense times precisely because you are invited to bring the story to bear on your own life and to test it against your own experience.

The things which I've found most impressive about Godly Play all hang together then: by virtue of trust in the truth and power of the Christian tradition, it presents the tradition as an object for the free play of children.

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