

PRAYER AND WORSHIP

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FACED WITH THE TASK OF WRITING on the topic of 'Prayer and worship' within the context of the 'The spirituality of children', I reflected on a number of definitions of prayer which I heard at a recent gathering of primary-school teachers. These included, 'raising your mind and heart to God', 'conversation with God', 'being at home with yourself and God', 'being still and empty', 'awareness of God acting in your life and the world'.

The teachers were then asked to question the children in their classes, and one school sent me a tape-recording of their discussion with Key Stage One children (ages 5–7). Children's definitions of prayer included 'talking to Jesus', 'thinking about God', 'when you have to sit still and not talk'.

Reflecting on my own childhood experiences brought to mind my grandmother, a lady whose smile I still remember very vividly, and with whom I learnt to bake, to sew, to play games and have fun as well as to pray. To pray with her was all quite natural and part of life. Another childhood experience of prayer was the end of the day chat with Mum about the joys and concerns of the day. I can still hear her words: 'Do your best love, then trust in God' – a philosophy I still try to live by!

A striking memory from early childhood is of hanging over the edge of the small boat that carries passengers to the Isle of Iona. The green water contrasted with the white sand filled me with an overwhelming awareness of the grandeur of God.

I could continue and fill this article with personal reflections, but suffice it to say that I have learnt to trust my own experiences. Knowing how to reflect on my life, in an attempt to deepen my own prayer and my understanding of prayer, has proved invaluable as I reflect with teachers in their search to find credible ways of praying with children. I firmly believe that the closer one is to one's own story, the more effective one will be in guiding children to prayer and worship.

'Take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is Holy ground'

Perhaps this is the first thing that we as adults need to do when approaching the theme of prayer with children. They too have their

stories and experiences of life, responding readily to joy and pain. In many ways children are natural and spontaneous 'pray-ers'. They are so caught up in the ordinary events of life that 'every common bush is afire'. I was recently part of a conversation about the naming of an expected baby. The parents were anxious because if the baby was a girl they wanted to call her Rosie. However, they could not help remembering that Mabel, the child's grandmother, did not really like the name. Mabel had died unexpectedly earlier in the year. The parents' five-year-old daughter Emily soon put their mind at rest.

'It will be fine to call her Rosie,' said Emily, 'because Grandma Mabel has already loved her in heaven before she comes to live with us.'

Emily's understanding of God was based on the joyful belief that God and Grandma Mabel together had already resolved the problem. In her own way she also reflects a tangible belief in the communion of saints to which Mabel now belongs.

In previous weeks Emily had been questioning why God had taken her Grandma to heaven, when everyone in the family loved her – a very difficult concept for anyone, adult or child, to come to terms with, especially in the early stages of bereavement. Listening to Emily's resolution to the Rosie problem revealed to her parents how she was gradually coming to terms with her Grandma's death.

Children's faith, and therefore their spirituality at this stage in their lives, is very simple and literal. For instance, a reception teacher was showing her children the new Advent calendar, and she later found Daniel examining the picture very carefully. 'Who are you looking for?' she asked him. 'My Grandad,' replied Daniel. 'He should be on the photograph because he's gone to Heaven to be with Jesus and Mary, but I can't find him.'

It is important, particularly in the Advent and Christmas seasons, to present Jesus not just as a baby but as an adult whose birth we celebrate on 25 December, and to avoid confusing children with messages such as: people who have died are in heaven with 'baby Jesus'.

Danny Sullivan, in a recent essay on 'Children's spirituality and our contemporary world', makes a plea for adults to learn how to listen to children, 'to have the humility to recognize that God is alive and active in their world and may indeed be trying to speak to us through them. If only we had the ears to listen.'¹ Sensitive questioning enables children to talk about those whom they miss painfully, but also offers them an opportunity to express their belief in God's loving care.

Perhaps the greatest challenge which teachers and parents face in today's society is to take the time to listen: to listen actively to children,

to raise awareness, to deepen understanding, quite simply to accompany children on their journeying, questioning, exploring and celebrating. To teach children *how* to pray is 'profoundly educational', as Cardinal Hume reminded teachers in one of his addresses on education.

The critical matter is for children to learn that there is a personal God who cares personally. At the heart of prayer is relationship. Prayer is not simply a discipline to be taught. This places great responsibility on the adults involved in children's spiritual journeys: they are to become companions, companions who know how to relate to children and listen attentively to the significant moments and experiences of children's lives.

The following extract, for example, speaks of the tremendous love that a child is experiencing, but it also encompasses much pain:

Dear God
help my brother
with his first tooth
is goving.
My mummy is
having
diffisulty
with us.
We help my
mummy and
my babby.
Amen.

Further conversation revealed the struggle the child was having, in coming to terms with the situation. When children feel safe they will engage in writing their own prayers which reflect their life experiences. For some children, though, it is not always appropriate to share their experiences in a school situation.

Adults need to be careful not to make assumptions about children's backgrounds and faith practice. It is also important to develop a conversation which speaks of children's actual experiences rather than use a language which relates to formal religious experiences.

For some children and adults the call to join hands for prayer is the call for discipline and order. 'No, you will not be going out to dinner until you are all standing still and we've said our grace!' Such is the cry of the stressed teacher trying to maintain good behaviour at the end of a hectic morning! Many children when asked the question 'When do you

pray?’ will trot out the regular diet of ‘morning and night prayer and at school before we go to dinner’. I do not intend to criticize this routine, which can set a lifelong pattern for prayer, but simply invite the reader to pause and reflect on the quality of these experiences and the opportunities that such occasions offer. Perhaps we should make more of them.

On a recent school visit I observed children passing a ‘Grace cube’ around the table. On each side of the cube was a child’s form of Grace that was beautifully illustrated. The children passed the cube to each other to pray their grace.

In many primary-school classrooms, teachers create a focal point for prayer. This can be a permanent feature in the classroom that changes to reflect the liturgical year or the current topic being explored in religious education. Some teachers prefer to have a ‘liturgy box’, and create a focal point with the children on the carpeted area of their classroom. The focal point is usually attractively presented with appropriate coloured drapes, posters, artefacts, statues, flowers, the Word of God and a candle. Its very presence is symbolic and quite often children have added their own pictures, a basket with prayer cards that they have written, artefacts made from lego or clay. All these are very real symbols coming out of children’s own experiences. This is laying a foundation for developing an appreciation of symbol and is crucial for the children’s liturgical formation, because our liturgy is full of symbol.

One such focal point that I observed during Lent was of a beautifully decorated cross made out of covered cornflake boxes. The children had painted each side to depict an aspect of Christ’s journey to Calvary. In another instance children had made and painted clay pots. One child told me: ‘I like playing with the clay, but it took a long time to make it the shape I wanted and then I had to decide how to decorate it. I think it looks good now – do you like it?’ The clay pots were the result of some work the teacher had been doing on self-esteem.

One way of silencing a group of teachers is to ask for volunteers to read or to pray a bidding prayer! Fortunately this is never a problem with children. They are naturally spontaneous ‘pray-ers’, whether it is to pray for someone who is ill, a pet that is sick or simply just to thank God for the gift of significant people in their lives. Whether it is at home or in school, children discover God’s name alongside Mum, Dad, teacher, and friend. For children just as for adults, God can become part of the totality of life’s experiences. So when we are worried, anxious or afraid we place the situation in God’s care. When we are in need, we cry out to God for help and, in whatever comes about to change things, we can identify God at work.

Dear God
 Please take care of Great Granny
 because she is very old and lonely now
 that Grandad is in Heaven with you.
 Keep her safe because she can't see
 or hear properly
 help her to get better.

Spontaneously praising God when, for example, we are delighted by something beautiful, is a response we learn easily as children. Children respond to being put in touch with the presence of God in all things, especially in people, and learn that God is present and acting in all events. An eight-year-old child, writing about 'New beginnings' in his exercise book, recorded and drew a flower, and then wrote 'joy in a new flower'; a baby in a cot – 'the day my sister was born'; a seaside scene – 'when we all went to Wales'.

An example of children's understanding and reflection on Lent and its implications and relatedness to her own life is this account by another eight-year-old child:

Jesus went into the wilderness. It is a place of
 silence and reflection,
 Before we make a decision we need to stop and
 think about what God wants us to do.
 My decisions:
 If I should carry on swimming?
 If I should be good at bad at school?
 Should I be mean or not?

A group of year six children had been talking about friends, and Sarah had integrated her own experience with that of Jesus:

Friendship is like a bridge between two people. I am friends with Jessica because when I am lonely she is always there. She lets me borrow her pens. I don't have a favourite friend. I like most people. I think Jesus was friends with all people. Jesus gave them all chances even the bad. Jesus always spoke to people.

Circle time is an activity that many schools have adopted in order to foster and nurture children's feelings about themselves, others and the day-to-day events of life. During circle time the teacher sits with the children in the circle. There is a sense of being equal and of being seen by, and able to see, everyone else in the circle, all at the same level.

Circles themselves are a very powerful means of communication. Each person is given the opportunity to talk and everyone is listened to. From talking to children about circle time, I discovered how much they appreciated the opportunity to speak and to be heard as well as listening to other children. They revealed an innate ability to listen to each other's stories with their hearts. Much can be learnt about children from circle time, not least how they relate to the rest of the group by forming the circle. Some children may demonstrate how lonely or isolated or excluded they feel. Circle time can be an excellent opportunity to discuss any issue, talk about feelings, share thoughts and prayers:

Circle time can be equally valuable at the end of the morning or end of the day. The class can be encouraged to evaluate their day and reflect on the processes, interactions and qualities of classroom life, looking at what has made the day good for them and others.²

Circle time has proved to be an excellent vehicle for helping children come to terms with trauma. When their school building was burnt down, one school successfully used circle time to help children talk about their feelings. In the safety of the circle they were enabled to talk about their loss, and also their future. The local Education Authority had re-housed the school community in an empty school building. The staff wanted the opportunity for children to express their hurt and fear after the fire, and circle time became an important activity in building up a sense of community in their new building. The children talked about their relief at not being in the school building when it was set on fire. They talked about their pictures and books and project work burnt in the flames. They remembered special events and special places in the school. A significant hymn was used during circle time to give thanks to God that none had been injured in the fire.

Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you,
I have called you by your name,
You are mine.
When the fire is burning all around you,
You will never be consumed by the flames.

The words of the hymn are now displayed together with the remains of a burnt book in the entrance to the school. It is significant that the plans for the new school building on the original site are also displayed.

'I have stilled and quieted my soul like a weaned child, like a weaned child on its mother's lap' (Ps 131:2). The image of a child totally at peace, relaxed and contentedly drifting off to sleep comes very easily to mind. So, too does the image of restless, attention-seeking children in assembly or church!

Stillness and silence do not come easily to children, especially in our noise-polluted society. From the moment children wake they are bombarded by sounds and fast-changing visual images as the high-tech world of video and computer games impact significantly on their days. They are subjected to constant noise, and silence for many children is alien. They do not find it easy or indeed necessary or desirable to accept the invitation to be quiet. Perhaps this is a stage in the spiritual journey which comes when adults have enabled children to discover God present in their lives – in their lives, that is, as children.

Religious traditions, however, over the centuries have taught the importance of outer silence and inner stillness for a life of prayer. If prayer is conversation, then one must learn to listen as well as to speak. If prayer is about an intimate relationship with God, then one has to learn to listen to the silences as well as the words. Silence is the *tool*, and as with all tools one has to learn the skill of using it. Silence is a gift we have all been given, but sometimes we need help to unwrap the gift and respond to the invitation to be still. Danny Sullivan, in his essay 'To such as these the Kingdom of Heaven belongs', recounts the following conversation that took place after an assembly. Children, teachers and parents had come into the school hall in silence while the music played quietly in the background. The music continued and slides were shown. No words were spoken and everyone left in silence. After the assembly the headteacher felt her skirt being tugged by six-year-old Matthew:

Matthew: I liked that this morning.

Headteacher: What did you like, Matthew?

Matthew: The quiet.

Headteacher: What did you like about it?

Matthew: It made me think.

Headteacher: What did you think about?

Matthew: About what I asked Mummy.

Headteacher: What did you ask, Matthew?

Matthew: I asked her what being dead was like.

Headteacher: And what did she say?

Matthew: She said it was like having a lovely long sleep.

Headteacher: And what were you thinking this morning, Matthew?

Matthew: I was thinking Mummy's right.³

Silence and stillness are among the most valuable and effective tools that exist for prayer. Children are invited into silence and helped to become still, so that they can listen to, and hear, what is going on within themselves. Fostering and nurturing silence are key tasks for any religious educator. It is perhaps one of the most important tasks of any teacher.

Children need to be given opportunities to develop an awareness of the otherness of life, something more than the obvious, something at which to wonder, something to question even when there is not necessarily a 'correct' answer. In developing children's spiritual awareness there are certain skills which will enable children to explore and unwrap the gift of silence: skills of:

- being physically still yet alert;
- being mentally still yet alert to the present moment;
- using all the senses;
- considering life meditatively;
- pondering something from different angles;
- acknowledging differences.

To develop these skills certain attitudes must be fostered:

- the desire to be touched by the mystery of life;
- the desire for inner space;
- a positive response to quiet reflection;
- individual self-confidence.

Teachers can develop these skills by setting up experiences for children to develop their imaginative powers through creative visualization activities; explaining to children the importance of posture to help them be alert and relaxed; ensuring that these activities are given unhurried, quality time and that instructions are given in a calm voice, that children are encouraged to become aware of their breathing and are helped to re-focus their attention when their minds wander. It is important for children to be familiar and comfortable with these rituals and to be initiated into them from an early age. The rituals can then be developed as the children grow older. How easy it is then to introduce children to Ignatian contemplation.

There are several books available to teachers to develop the skills necessary for meditating. Many young children go through phases of questioning what will happen when they die. Debbie, an eight-year-old girl, received much consolation after meditating on the story of Jairus's daughter. She was afraid of dying, and at the end of the meditation came and spoke to me: 'I'm glad Jesus will be there to give me a hug when I die'.

More and more children are starting school unfamiliar with traditional prayers. It is no longer part of life's routine for many families, and for many older Catholics there is a real sense of loss. Religious education programmes build them generously into the lesson throughout the year. Formal prayers using set forms of words are introduced and used in a variety of ways: through hearing them said, joining in with them, focusing on parts of them and learning them by heart. Children are also introduced to the gestures and postures of formal liturgical prayer, for example genuflecting, bowing, joining hands and making the sign of the cross.

Prayers that are committed to memory may provide solace at some times, courage at others, or active and conscious participation in a celebration. There are also interesting and creative ways of teaching these traditional prayers to children. Drama, gesture, painting and praying them phrase by phrase are possible ways.

A good programme of religious education will teach people how to be festive. I would even urge that this is the end result of religious education . . . people who know how to celebrate their love for one another, and the mystery of God's love at each stage of their experience.⁴

This statement from Tad Guzie is a source of inspiration and challenge to me. I marvel at the wonderful liturgies that children experience in their primary schools. This is particularly so since the introduction of the national religious education programme, 'Here I am'.⁵ Towards the end of each topic explored in the programme teachers enable children to celebrate in worship all that they have been exploring and learning. This part of the educational process is fittingly known as REJOICE.

Time and space are set aside for a celebration. Children are invited to bring together the work they have done and select something which is significant, relevant and meaningful to them. With the teacher and amongst themselves they decide on which songs, poems, dance, drama, readings, psalms, symbols and stories to use, and how and where to use them.

The power of music and song makes for a profound way of praying. Some music is for listening and meditative prayer; there are also songs of praise and thanksgiving, and other music captures the spirit and meaning of the topic that has been explored.

These REJOICE celebrations give teachers not only quality time and space with children but also offer children opportunities for appropriate

experiences of worship. I have been privileged to be present at several REJOICE celebrations in schools. One in particular comes to mind, when the children signed each other with holy water. They made the sign of the cross with holy water on each other's foreheads. This was a meaningful and prayerful conclusion to a lesson on baptism. One child commented: 'I like that bit with the holy water. It was special.' They concluded the celebration by sharing mini Mars Bars.

The experiences I have been drawing on are typically found in Catholic schools for children aged up to eleven. Many children are given a very rich liturgical formation in the classroom, and the question arises: 'Does this experience find an echo in the wider community of the parish? How does the parish build on the gifts and talents of these young children?' A systematic and sympathetic approach to children's prayer and worship in parishes is much more difficult to accomplish for a host of reasons, not least because many adults, having the natural resistance to change and novelty, still see traditional practices as the only 'proper' way to approach God. But many other adults, as well as children, are hungering for effective new and meaningful ways to celebrate liturgy, thirsting to participate fully in liturgy that is in keeping with their experience of life and their spiritual development. Within schools, new ways are being tried and are increasingly bearing rich fruit. Are we prepared to take the risk and let the way we teach children to pray, the way we celebrate with children, form the wider vision that leads to the provision of good liturgical celebrations week after week?

NOTES

¹ Danny Sullivan, *The candles are still burning: directions in sacrament and spirituality* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), p 137.

² Noreen Wetton and Peter Cansell, *Feeling good: raising self-esteem in the primary classroom* (Forbes Publication, 1993), p 44.

³ Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p 142.

⁴ Tad Guzie, *The book of sacramental basics* (Paulist Press, 1981), p 22.

⁵ Ann Byrne and Chris Malone, *Here I am* (HarperCollins, 1992).