

WHO IS JESUS, WHO IS GOD FOR CHILDREN?

By ELIZABETH MACDOUGALL

MY RESPONSE TO THIS QUESTION, 'Who is Jesus, who is God for children?', comes out of a variety of experiences: as a teacher in a number of contrasting schools, as a catechist in parish preparation for First Communion, and through the experiencing of our own children and godchildren.

My immediate reaction to the question of the title was that children have a clear picture of Jesus as the baby who grew to be a man, and to whom they relate as a friend or brother. They are familiar with the idea of prayer as talking to Jesus. The Father whom Jesus came to tell us about was, I thought, a comfortable concept, on the grounds that the 'Our Father' is said or sung frequently and features prominently in school life. I did suspect that God our Father, although known as the God who made us, and who loves us so much that he sent his Son, might still feature as a somewhat elderly figure with strong Old Testament characteristics. I have always found that children relate to the Old Testament God of instant action as more understandable than the God of love in the New Testament.

I found that written material on children's understanding of Jesus or of God was sparse, and so decided that perhaps the best approach was simply to ask the children I teach, and to listen to what they said, without trying to fit their perceptions into my ideas or understanding of what they had been taught. This turned out to be a fascinating experience, especially when the children got hold of the idea that there were people interested in what they thought. I realized yet again how infinitely wonderful and surprising children are, and became even more convinced that as adults we learn more from children than they ever learn from us – if we have the time to listen.

The article which follows is as far as possible the children's own answer to the question asked by the title.

Does it have to be God, or can it be Jesus?

This question, posed very seriously by a six-year-old, really focused the whole issue.

To gather some material for this article, I concentrated on two groups of children: Year Two – aged six to seven; and Year Five – aged nine to

ten. I asked each group to draw pictures of God and of Jesus, and we then spent some time discussing the pictures.

In order to get some idea as to whether or not the picture changed, depending on what was being taught or celebrated when the question was asked, I organized three sessions during the year: in November, when we would be celebrating the feast of All Saints; in December, when we would be celebrating Advent; in March, when we would be celebrating the season of Lent. (The time scale available did not allow for a session to be held after Easter.) Each session consisted of a short introduction, some time spent drawing while chatting to their friends and, finally, a discussion of the pictures.

Some basic ground rules were established and accepted:

- there was no right or wrong answer;
- there would be no criticism of anyone's ideas;
- we were interested in each other's thoughts, not the quality of the drawings.

November

On the first occasion the children drew an illustration for one of the hymns they had enjoyed singing: 'All of God's saints are living now in glory'. This was the point at which the question 'Does it have to be God, or can it be Jesus?' was posed, and a lively argument ensued, during which several quite distinct points of view emerged. One group held the view that you couldn't put Jesus in, because that was too easy, as everyone knew what Jesus looked like. Another group held that you couldn't put Jesus in, as they had been asked to draw God, and Jesus wasn't God. Another group felt that the best plan was to put both Jesus and God in, thus ensuring that you were doing what you had been asked. It was felt by another group that putting Jesus in meant having to put Mary in as well, but this objection was immediately met by the counter-argument that if you were drawing heaven then of course Mary would be there anyway.

The discussion continued, but now moved to who or what were saints. Opinions varied, but in general saints were defined as people who:

- love God and die;
- are Catholic;
- go to church a lot;
- die on purpose;
- meet Jesus;
- give a lot to the poor.

The next question to be mulled over was the rather vexed one of what saints actually do in heaven. Here there was a very definite split between the younger and the older group. The younger children had very vivid pictures in mind, mostly involving either having a party or a picnic or walking in a garden, in the countryside or in the clouds. The older group seemed much more constrained, wanting reassurance about what was allowed, and putting forward drawings of heaven in which no one was actually doing very much other than standing around. Another difference was the absence of halos and wings among the younger group but their total domination among the older group.

I have attempted to summarize the range of pictures, but this in no way does justice to the depth of thought and explanation that accompanied each effort. Some points that struck me were:

- the presence in a number of pictures of Jesus as a baby;
- the major place occupied by Mary in many pictures;
- a number of pictures with Jesus on the cross;
- putting in churches or other buildings to show that saints had something to do with church;
- the presence of a number of ghosts or tombstones in the younger children's drawings;
- Mary holding the baby Jesus in several pictures.

During the discussion the fact that you have to be dead to be in heaven surfaced again. A member of the younger group then explained that part of his drawing was his granddad who died just when he could make wooden toys – 'I expect Jesus is helping him now,' he added. It was at this point that another child asked how Jesus could help anyone, as Jesus and Mary are pictures on the wall at school.

December

During Advent, although we used prayers and liturgy appropriate to the season, we were also preparing for the nativity plays which are traditionally performed for the parents each year towards the end of December.

In some ways there was no difficulty when the same children were again asked to draw a picture of Jesus. Most drawings concentrated on the baby in the manger with kings, shepherds and the traditional Christmas card scenes. There were however a minority of children who added a drawing of a cross above the stable. In some cases a crucifixion scene was shown within the stable. They explained that this was because they were drawing Jesus and not just baby Jesus.

When I discussed the pictures with groups of children, it was evident that, whereas they had a very clear picture of the Christmas story, it did

not seem to have any relationship to our earlier discussion of Jesus in heaven. Among the younger group in particular, it was at times difficult to separate the story of baby Jesus from the many other stories of Christmas, especially those of Father Christmas. Among the older group there was a linking of the situation into which Jesus was born with that of many people in the world today. They were very much aware of homelessness and of refugees. It was not really very clear whether or not the outcome of this was a romantic picture of the conditions under which such people are living.

There was in both groups a generosity of spirit towards this baby and other babies, especially those children who were not as fortunate as they were – being fortunate consisted mainly in receiving presents from Father Christmas. Among many of the children there was a puzzlement that Father Christmas did not make a special point of bringing presents to poor children, as he knew all about everyone. One suggestion was that they could not write lists for him – but this was discarded by most others on the basis that surprises were best. Almost without exception the children spoke of the presents which they were making or buying for other members of the family.

To a few of the children the kings took the place of Father Christmas for Jesus. Two of the children who had drawn the cross made a distinction between Jesus and the baby Jesus, seeing them as two different persons. In every case the baby had a large halo. Mary and Joseph also had halos, but they tended to be smaller than those which adorned the baby.

Among the younger children the baby appeared to be dressed, but in the older group the baby was more likely to be naked except for a small cloth and the arms tended to be outstretched. The younger children referred to Joseph as the baby Jesus' father. Among the older group Joseph was stated to be Jesus' earthly father – but it was difficult to tease out what was meant by this.

The fact that Mary and Joseph were not married did not cause any problem at all – it seemed to be generally accepted that babies are often born before mummy and daddy get married, and frequently without any daddy at all.

God the Father who sent the message to Mary about being Jesus' mother did not seem to produce any picture in the children's minds.

Some points that struck me were:

- the lack of variety compared to the earlier drawings of heaven;
- the addition of the crucifix to some of the drawings to show that they were drawing Jesus;

- the halo shown on the baby by both groups, and on Mary and Joseph by the older group;
- angels with wings in both sets of pictures.

March

During Lent, when the final pictures were drawn, our theme for assemblies and liturgies was building bridges, but this did not appear to influence the drawings or discussions. The majority of pictures in both age groups showed Jesus on the cross. The main difference was the amount of detail. The younger children tended to put in a lot of detail, especially when showing the 'gory' nature of the crucifixion. They also included many more people in the general scene. When other crosses were shown, they were of an equal size, and it was not always possible to pick out which of the three crosses was that of Jesus. The older children tended to concentrate on a much more artistic approach, showing Jesus on a larger cross with the two thieves on much smaller crosses on either side. In most cases Jesus had a halo. Few of the pictures in this age group showed any other people present. Some of the older children had added another drawing alongside to show what Jesus looked like. In these Jesus was bearded, and wore a brown tunic and sandals.

Discussion with the children after they had done the drawings suggested that this was a different Jesus from the baby at Christmas and the Jesus in heaven, but there was an overwhelming conviction that this was the 'real' Jesus. When asked why Jesus died on the cross, the answers showed some confusion. The younger children spoke about the bad people who killed Jesus because they did not like him. They had difficulty in putting their ideas into words, but they appeared to have some sense of good people always having a hard time when they try to put things right for other people. There was also a suggestion of Jesus dying for us 'because we were bad'. The older group spoke very confidently about Jesus dying to save us. When this point was pursued, it was not at all clear from whom or what we were being saved, and how the death of Jesus would help in any way. The discussion then concentrated more on Jesus dying because he loved us. There was a very clear understanding of how much love was involved in giving up a life to save a friend's life, but some concern about how this actually related to Jesus and his friends. The discussion then took another turn when it was suggested by one member of the group that Jesus had died so that we could have mass and communion. There followed not so much a discussion as a number of statements about communion. There

was obviously some concern about eating the body of Christ – especially if you were a vegetarian (this coincided with the concerns being expressed about B.S.E., or ‘mad cow disease’, and the eating of beef). One child had a very vivid picture in mind, of Jesus bleeding on the cross, when she received communion. Many of the children did not receive from the chalice as it was not the custom in their parish or family; others did not because they did not like the idea of drinking blood. There was a very literal understanding of the body and blood of Christ. I joined the discussion at this point and reminded the children about the Last Supper, and how Jesus had enjoyed this meal with his friends and had asked them to continue to do this after he had gone. The group listened politely to my contribution but ignored it completely.

Some points that struck me were:

- the detailed nature of the drawings;
- the presence of a manger containing a baby in two of the drawings.

The older group of children then decided to write out their own descriptions of Jesus and God his Father. They could put their name on this piece of writing or not, as they wished. It was their own choice at this point not to discuss their ideas with any one else, as they wanted to give only what they thought themselves. Everyone did in fact name their ‘work’ and were very keen to let me know what they had said.

There were a number of descriptions of what the children thought God was like, a number of descriptions of what they thought God did, and quite a few which concentrated on what the writers did *not* believe about God.

There appeared to be difficulty in distinguishing between God and Jesus, or in establishing a relationship between God and Jesus. In talking about prayer, it was seldom easy to work out to whom the prayer was being addressed when the word ‘Lord’ was used, as God our Father and our Lord seemed to be interchangeable.

The following are excerpts from the descriptions written by the children:

I think what God looks like is hard to explain. I think he is quite big. I always imagine him like Jesus, with a beard and long hair, with a halo and wearing a sort of dress with a piece of rope round his waist.

When I think of God and Jesus I think of all the good things he has done.

I think God is special because he died for us because he loves us.

I think God is peaceful and never gets angry.

When I think of God I think of light always shining behind him and a friendly face and a calming voice.

I imagine three great big solid stone chairs and God is in the middle, Mary Jesus' earthly mother on the left and Jesus on the right with angels all round giving out wine, grapes and bread.

Jesus is not a member of the community, he is a member of you.

I don't believe that Jesus really made miracles happen, just that when you pray people think that God will sort it out for them but sometimes that does not happen.

I don't believe that the sea is God's tears.

I don't think that storms are when God is angry because I don't think God ever gets angry.

I think that Jesus is like the magic ring and God is the magic lamp of Aladdin.

I think that when they put Jesus in the tomb the angels took him back.

There was insufficient time for the children to explain or develop their views further. As soon as we started to talk about what they had written, it was obvious that nothing was ever quite as it seemed, and that even the simplest statement contained many layers.

This discussion was taking place in the week after the terrible massacre at the school in Dunblane, and this came up in various forms. It was difficult to know whether the children were expressing their own feelings or adults' attempts to explain how such a thing could happen. Several children spoke about God allowing this to happen because he had given us free will. One girl spoke about God crying too, but a number of children did not seem to feel that there was any need to explain God's involvement in such matters, though they felt it was very important to pray for all the people who had suffered.

Who is Jesus, who is God for children?

And so I come back to the question with which I started. Who is Jesus, who is God for children? And the answer? The simple answer is that I do not know. There does not seem to be one clear picture of God or of Jesus which is held by this group of children, and there is no reason to believe that they are untypical of any similar group. Their

understanding and experience lead them to different pictures, many of them held instinctively. So what can we say?

There does appear to be a difference between the younger and the older children – although even the older group were very young. It is hard to say at what point children begin to produce the standard traditional pictures, which contain a mildness or blandness not present in those of the youngest children. These very young boys and girls had a lack of fear in their approach and a confidence that they knew what heaven was like which was absent even a few years later, when the approach was much more cautious. This familiarity with such matters did not, however, indicate any lack of respect or of wonder – there is something awe-inspiring about a six-year-old who looks you straight in the eye and tells you ‘Of course there will be picnics in heaven, that is what Jesus likes to do’.

There is, it would seem, a series of very mixed messages going to children. Much of what is done in class and at assembly is geared to their level of understanding – or to what we think is their level of understanding – but at the same time the words of the traditional prayers and hymns can cause great confusion, as can some of the religious art which remains popular. Children are quite capable of ignoring what does not make any sense to them or of changing it to something which does. This can mean that although the words being used, for example ‘Our Father, who art in heaven . . .’, seem to be understood, they are not in fact helping to advance the children’s understanding of God.

Much of what the children learn seemed to be in separate boxes which co-existed happily even if they seemed to be in opposition. In one and the same picture, heaven can contain Jesus the adult with his friends and Mary holding Jesus the baby in her arms.

What was being taught at the time did not in fact influence things as much as what was experienced – something we should already know from our own lives.

There was very little distinction drawn between God the Father and Jesus; ‘God’ could refer to one or other, or both, as could ‘Lord’. This did not concern the children. There seemed to be a mixing of Father Christmas and of Baby Jesus as alternatives which were of equal merit. Among the older children Jesus appeared very much as a bearded, long-haired, gowned, sandal-wearing figure with a halo.

There was, however, among the children an acceptance of the ‘mystery’, and no need was felt to explain everything. Perhaps that should be our starting point too for our understanding of Jesus and of

God – an acceptance of the mystery at the heart of it all; a willingness to live in this mystery without reducing it in our attempts to explain it; and a readiness to follow the example of the youngest of the children in knowing that being in heaven with Jesus will be great!