



Rondebosch Roundabout

Heart talks with God

Acknowledgements

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A little child shall lead them



Although an outsider looking on at Christianity may be forgiven for thinking otherwise, children are in fact at the very centre of the Christian faith. It remains one of the enigmas of Christianity that despite Jesus' unequivocal 'option' for children, it has taken us nearly two millennia to begin to bring children in from the margins of faith, taking note of the real significance of those six short words in Isaiah's prophecy: 'a little child shall lead them' (11:6). Today there are an increasing number of Christian scholars focusing on the theme of childhood and calling for the demarginalisation of children. Underlying the range of issues being raised is that of the tendency, both religious and secular, to view childhood as provisional, a preparatory stage for a true human being, which is adulthood. This is an idea at times reflected in the work of some of the developmental psychologists, on whose work Christian scholars draw (and at times are at issue with), not least that of James Fowler in *Stages of Faith*.

The notion of the provisional and by implication incomplete state of childhood is contrary to Jesus' own being, teaching and behaviour. He accorded inestimable value to children, precisely as children. And core themes in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Q'uran are contained in stories in which a child or children are central – the stories of the boys Moses, David and Samuel, in the Hebrew scriptures and of Ishmael in the Q'uran, for example. Of course for Christians the significance of childhood is grounded in that pivot of our faith, the Incarnation, where we believe that in some unfathomable way God came into the world in all the vulnerability of a young child. The point is that in each of these faith traditions God intervenes through the election and agency of children.

Locating a theological conversation on children

During the student unrest in the 1970s fourteen-year-old Fikile was arrested, along with several of his friends, for staying away from school. His mother was among those who parked themselves

outside the prison until their children were released. Fikile's mother, Sibongile, remembers: 'Later that day Fikile got out [of prison]. He was all right. He was very quiet. He didn't talk about being arrested. He didn't talk about anything'. Sibongile said her son had changed a lot. He looked the same but he was *no longer a child*.

This account comes from a little volume entitled *Thula Baba* (Ravan Press, 1990). It comprises episodes from the lives of a group of domestic workers in a South African city during the apartheid era, when influx control laws played havoc with black family life throughout the country. The book's focus is on the injustice and abnormality of the way in which black children during that time grew up. Fikile, emerging from prison 'no longer a child', symbolises the lost generation of children at the height of the struggle against apartheid – those who died and those who had to grow up prematurely – as well as the many others who were raised by extended family members, away from their parents, many of these children never to be seen by parents again.

In preparation for writing this paper I read this little book again from cover to cover, to remind myself that as a white of that era growing up in economic, social and political privilege I was in some way complicit. And if I dare to speak about childhood and children now, I should do so with great caution and in dependence on the mercy of God.

The political barriers to children living with their parents (and a man with his wife) might have been lifted, but in many cases the social and economic barriers have not. Even where families are together, the legacy of apartheid lives on in poverty and with it crime, unemployment, substance abuse, violence, sexual abuse, HIV/Aids and many other realities deeply affecting the lived experience of children. Like Fikile and his friends during the struggle years, children today are being robbed of their childhood for other reasons. In our country there are street children, sniffing glue and sleeping in drain pipes; there are children assuming parental roles in raising siblings; and of course there are abused children.

There are also challenges to childhood that come from other sources. These affect rich and poor alike and emanate from social issues like divorce, domestic violence, step-relationships, children born with no hope of ever knowing their paternal identity,





alternative models of 'family' and the struggle for acceptance, disability, adoption – and a whole lot more. In a letter to her granddaughters Denise Ackermann, in *After the Locusts*, speaks about the reality of hybridity – which in some cases presents yet another challenge for children to overcome. Barack Obama, in his autobiographical writings *Dreams from my Father*, describes with both pain and insight the reality of his own hybridity, of which he became aware at a point in his childhood.



Many of us who have children will, together with these children, have had very different personal experiences of childhood (although each with its unique challenges and sometimes pain). For this we are grateful. But it is both sobering and chilling to be reminded that when one single child, or any other 'little one', suffers it is an abomination to God. Jesus made this very plain.



The Children's Charter of South Africa, formulated in 1992, provides a detailed list of the rights of children, embedding each of the areas where children's rights have been violated. The disturbing thing about reading this charter is the realisation that from the perspective of most children in our country not much has changed for them existentially in the sixteen years between 1992 and now. The perpetuation of children's suffering continues in other parts of Africa and elsewhere as well. And we are told that every three seconds a child somewhere on the planet dies of malnutrition. We may not be politicians or sociologists, but as people of faith we have a responsibility to interrogate our beliefs and praxis to see how they accommodate children and their rights; to be chastened where we are found wanting; and to identify ways in which we can make a difference.



In his article 'Remembering Rachel's Children: An Urban Agenda for People who Care', Walter Brueggemann uses a number of key scriptural texts to highlight issues that people of faith must face. He notes, for example, how Rachel's lament (recorded at first as Jacob's lament) for her children has come down the centuries in such a way that her children have 'become a large, bloody sign for those left unprotected and unvalued'. These children, for Brueggemann and others, are both *real* children, for whom God weeps, and *symbols* of all the 'little ones' (*anawim*) – the marginalised.

Where does our faith come in? For Brueggemann, 'the difference



that faith makes is not that we are better, or know more, or can do more. The difference is that we are children of these texts, and we are pledged not to forget'. Brueggemann notes how 'We notice, when we are faithful, what the world discounts. We notice the little ones, the hurting ones, the weak ones. They are the ones so difficult to notice when we are busy and selfish and angry and fearful'.

This challenge from Brueggemann raises at least two questions for me. First, how do we accommodate the different ways of being a child that we are faced with today? Second, how do we in our faith communities effectively contribute to the eradication of ways of experiencing childhood that are scandalous? I hope that these questions will accompany us as we move on to consider that most extraordinary feature of Jesus' teaching: God's option for children.

God's option for children

It would be remiss, as a Christian, to begin a section on 'God's option for children' anywhere else but in the birth of Jesus. For it is here that all the elements we need to cover in our conversation are opened up. We will consider three of them:

Where we find God

If there is one thing that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation has the capacity to do when correctly understood, it is to ground our faith, rooting it in the material. But it does more than this. In what Christians believe to be a startling conjunction of the divine and the human (of transcendence and immanence), that which transpired through Mary resulting in the birth of her son, proclaims the following: from now on she or he who would know anything about God must look here, at this immanence. Jesus: Immanuel, God with us.

God is not only present in human history, but present in a particular way – in the small, the weak, the vulnerable – in a newborn baby. In a word, as Robert pointed out in a sermon recently, God in the Incarnation re-centres us around the child. It is surely no co-incidence that Jesus is described as the Lamb and not the Sheep of God...





There is more. God enters human history as a poor child – a child whose family was situated on the lower rungs of society, and whose parents were soon to be refugees, and for whom, writes David Jensen in *Graced Vulnerability*, ‘there is no room in respectable quarters’. Jensen goes on to say that ‘Jesus’ birth, like those in the world’s poorest nations, is full of the promise of new life, yet also threatened by the forces of power and privilege that prey on the vulnerable’. But in the great paradox, it is precisely here that God is to be found.

The full personhood of children



I have always been somewhat patronising towards Coptic stories about the Holy Family’s sojourn in Egypt, whence they fled from King Herod. The Copts, quite remarkably, place this event at the centre of their faith and have a detailed account of the family’s stay there. An intriguing feature, canonised nowhere else in Christianity to my knowledge, is a number of miracles believed to have been performed by the very young child Jesus. There are numerous accounts of him causing water to appear from nowhere; he brings clay birds to life, makes snow to fall, and when the family drew near to one place, idols come tumbling down as the child approaches.



The thought has now occurred to me that these stories that I have regarded as quaint may contain some profound truth. I wonder if they symbolise some deep-seated acknowledgement that Jesus was the *same person* when he was a young child as he was when he grew up? In other words, they speak of the full personhood of Jesus from the beginning. Viewed from a slightly different angle, this underscores what Christians claim to believe about the Incarnation, and which constitutes the core of our faith: from his conception Jesus is for Christians the symbol – no, the sacrament – of God-with-us. He doesn’t become this only when he grows to adulthood.



This theological undergirding provided by the Incarnation should have an impact on the way we view and treat all children. As with other groups consigned to the margins of life, implicitly regarded as not-quite-as-human-as-others, it becomes easy for an idea of the provisional nature of childhood to express itself in ways

that overlook the value and the rights of children *as children*.

The twentieth-century theologian Karl Rahner has a chapter in *Theological Investigations* on ideas for a theology of childhood, the first section of which is revealingly entitled 'The Unsurpassable Value of Childhood'. For Rahner, of all stages of life it is childhood and youth that suffer from the impression of being merely provisional, of existing simply to shape adult life. Yet, contends Rahner, right from the beginning the child is a person, and more than this, the child is a partner of God. Rahner went further to insist that to be human means that the whole of our life is incorporated into who we are – the past is retained and not left behind. For Rahner, then, childhood is an abiding reality, not merely something provisional, a preparation for adulthood, the growth from one stage into another. Regarding the full personhood of the child and recalling a core Christian belief, Rahner observes that: 'Christianity is aware of the mystery of that which already contains all present within itself, and yet still has to become all; the beginning which is the basis and foundation of all that is to come'.

That Jesus regarded children as full human beings is made clear in the passages Matthew 18:1-5 and Mark 10:13-16, among others. In these passages he challenges adults both to accept children and to become like them. Yet the New Testament, notably Paul, also alludes to childhood in the context of immaturity – childishness – urging Christians to grow up and move beyond childish ways. So, to see children as Jesus did, and to accord them the status of full personhood, is not to idealise them.

And this takes us into our next point, which deals with an age-old dilemma regarding children. Given Jesus' high regard for them, but equally given our experience of them, should we view children as saints or sinners?

Saints or sinners?

A few years back Marcia Bunge edited a volume entitled *The Child in Christian Thought*, which traces religious attitudes to children from the earliest times to the present. What becomes clear as one proceeds through this book is that while no single doctrine of the child has predominated through history, behind views on children





has lurked the theological question: are children depraved and evil or are they innocent and good? On the whole, most groups, including a number of prominent figures such as John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards and the more contemporary Karl Rahner, have acknowledged ambivalence: children (like us all) are both sinners and saints.



Augustine, reflecting on the suffering of the 'Holy Innocents' (Herod's massacre), grappled with this issue in his *Confessions*, and this was the precursor to his doctrine of original sin. Noticing how a well-fed infant cried bitterly when another child suckled from its mother's breast and realising the consistency of young children in this type of behaviour, he concluded that a child's innocence lay 'in the weakness of its infant limbs, not its will'. I doubt if there is one person who would not sympathise with Augustine in this!



I do not propose to enter the debate around original sin here, but through it both Augustine and more modern thinkers help to dispel the notion that God's option for children lies in their purity and innocence. For, as Jensen observes, 'if there is a levelling statement in the Christian tradition, it is surely the doctrine of original sin'. We do, however, need to reflect a little on the idea of sin itself for it is relevant to this conversation about children.



Rahner is helpful here, noting that a child is born simultaneously into a history of sin but also into God's promise of grace, allowing for the ambiguities of childhood. For childhood is a beginning in two different senses. Every child's existence represents a beginning which 'springs up in the midst of a pre-existing context'. From the outset there is the history of guilt, gracelessness, and so on, but greater than this, 'from the beginning a child and his origins are encompassed by the love of God and the pledge of that grace' which comes to all people in Jesus Christ (*Theological Investigations*).



In continuity with this Jensen, commenting on the birth of his daughter, understands the sin into which a child is born in the context of creation's travail:



Sin was not the first word that gave birth to Hannah Grace. The beginning of her life was not epitomized by depravity and doom; rather, it was graced by vulnerability, relationship,

and hope. Yet at the same time that Hannah Grace came into the world with such promise, she became open to the wounded nature of creation itself.

Jensen roots these comments in Schleiermacher's understanding of sin, noting the latter's suggestion that original blessedness also entails a tragic dimension. Because Schleiermacher's understanding of humanity is thoroughly relational, his understanding of sin is anchored here too, implying that sin has to do with threatened and broken relationships.

I labour the issue of sin because the way we understand it has a profound effect both on how we understand children and on how we equip them to recognise and manage the things in themselves and others that we might understand to be tied up with the 'condition of sin'. Indeed, we might ask, is sin a helpful term to introduce to children or is it not?

But the issue of children in relation to sin has meaning for adults too, and it brings hope. For to become like a little child and therefore to be acceptable to God, does not require sinlessness. Children, like us all, are born into the condition of creatureliness, which implies the ambiguities and struggles that we all grapple with.

Becoming like children

If it is not a child's inherent goodness that makes her or him acceptable to God, then what is it? Attempts to interpret the passages in which Jesus speaks about children are legion. But what is clear is that these passages speak about both the *status* and *nature* of children.

With regard to their *status*, children should be protected, valued and welcomed. This is clear. There is no ambiguity here. It is the *nature* of children that for us is more problematic because, without any precedent in Jewish literature, it seems that we are being asked to grasp the anomalous idea of children as models for adults: small children as models for discipleship. Yet this same nature that we are to emulate is also elusive. It is not easy to pin down the characteristics that Jesus recognised and so loved in





children, and which, in contrast to the prevailing wisdom of his time, made them welcome in the realm (Kingdom) of God.

To be sure, children in Jesus' world were marginalised and as such symbolic of other vulnerable groups. To embrace childlikeness, then, means to take on vulnerability and dependence. It also means to somehow identify with those other groups symbolised by children. But it seems that Jesus' behaviour towards children suggests something in addition to their election simply as 'representatives of marginality'.

It would be folly to typecast children in an attempt to identify what it is about them that is so attractive and acceptable to God. But, acknowledging with Rahner the *mystery* of the child, there are certain characteristics that we might suggest as the grounds for the special favour children find with God. Here, I would like to suggest, are some of them: their openness and their innate trust; their spontaneity and responsiveness; their vulnerability; their imaginations; their delight in little things and their sense of nature being alive. These are among the qualities that easily become blunted in adults, or disappear altogether. But they are the very qualities that belong to a 'partner of God', as Rahner and others describe the child.

An observation by Anne Thurston seems appropriate at this point: 'An invitation to play [with a child] is an invitation to let go. It is an invitation to glimpse the Kingdom' (*Because of Her Testimony*). We might express this same point a little differently, as Richard Rohr does in the dedication of his book, *Simplicity*, 'little ones everywhere ... hold before the world the secrets of the ever-coming Christ'. How then do we exercise our responsibility towards children? This question brings us face-to-face with that old-fashioned term 'stewardship'.

Stewardship of our children

In a chapter sub-titled 'The Search for Operating Instructions', Bonny Miller-McLemore reflects on the hit-and-miss nature of most parents' approach to parenthood. What has helped her, she writes, is to draw three parties into dialogue: Christianity, feminism and psychology. The legacy of each on its own in relation to childhood is fraught, but a conversation, suggests Miller-McLemore,



can identify core themes that confirm her own thesis: that children should be fully respected as persons, valued as gifts and viewed as agents (*Let the Children Come*).

The need for the type of conversation described by Miller-McLemore draws our attention to the challenge that parents, educators, care-givers and any of us who have contact with children face in knowing how to be good stewards of the children entrusted to us. The dilemma is real, the more so because the problems and complexities of contemporary society demand of us a wisdom in this area that at times seems super-human. So I am by no means being categoric and make no claim to being exhaustive regarding the areas that should fall under the stewardship of children. No more do I lay claim to having been a model parent myself.

I simply share a few of the things that have become important to me along the way, which seem to be endorsed by the views of others I have come to respect, and which I think are consistent with the way I understand Jesus' imperative regarding children.

I begin by noting the three-fold observation of Martha and Ross Snyder and Ross Snyder (Jnr): every child wants to function, every child wants to live in relationship, and for every child there is an exciting world to be explored. The more I think about this, the more convinced I am that this simple mantra about the child is profound, valid as a basis both for responsible stewardship of our children and as a framework for understanding their rights and aspirations.

Content with now

We whose lives reflect Western values inhabit a world in which we are taught from early on to be discontent, both with what we have and with who we are. Commenting on the characteristics of a consumer society, Jensen notes how we teach our children to be always 'on the way to somewhere else' – either to have something else, to be something else or to go somewhere else. We begin early on asking questions of them like 'what do you want to be when you grow up?'

We do this forgetting that children inherently possess deep contentment simply being who they are, for, as Jensen writes,





‘children are already fully alive, fully endowed with promise in God’s world. They do not simply grow into the future, but inhabit a present fully pregnant with meaning’. Is this something that issues a challenge to us as adults too?



Small is beautiful

In E.F. Schumacher’s book, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* he warns of the folly of the pursuit of profit and progress, and the promotion of giant organisations in which people cease to matter. The book was written three decades ago, and while there may be permutations in the issues facing us today, the principles espoused I believe are the same. Schumacher draws the reader to a focus on what is small, personal and meaningful.



These ideas reminded me of the poignant final chapter of Denise Ackermann’s book, *After the Locusts*, which is a letter to her step-grandson, Seth. Recalling a walk together up Lion’s Head in Cape Town, Denise marvels at Seth’s ability to ‘see truly and with wonder the small and unobtrusive objects’, and she refers to Stephen Jay Gould’s comment that ‘God dwells among the details, not in the realm of generality’. This is perhaps another way of describing the presence of the extraordinary in the ordinary.



I suggest that our stewardship of children, who instinctively notice detail and appreciate small things, should involve nurturing this quality in them, providing them with tools to swim against the current that before long will want to sweep them to the bigger, the better, the more general and the more complex.



Educating with wisdom



A third imperative, I believe, in our stewardship of children is that we educate them with wisdom and into wisdom. Schumacher also has a fair amount to say about education and the importance of it. None of us will disagree with this. But Schumacher’s praise of education is qualified. More education can help us, he contends, only if it produces more wisdom and transmits ideas of value.



None of us will dispute the need for education, and for every child to have the opportunity to be educated. But neither will we

dispute the fact that it is education and the knowledge it produces unbridled by wisdom that is among the root causes of some of the crises we face today, not least the global ecological crisis.

In South Africa, where the formal education available to the majority of children still lags behind that offered to the privileged, the need for wisdom becomes an added challenge. But for all children the reality is that, much as we would wish it otherwise, they will probably not be educated in wisdom at school. This places the onus on us, notably as members of families and religious communities, to nurture wisdom in our children. And it calls us to draw also from the wells of traditional wisdom that too often are by-passed.

Embracing difference

The embrace of difference, and the valuing of those different from ourselves, is something else that belongs in the terrain of stewardship of children.

I like the exposition of our common problems with difference that Denise Ackermann gives her granddaughters, prefacing it by the acknowledgement that 'we do not always live well with difference'. Here, for Denise, are some of our tendencies when it comes to difference: we fail to see 'others' as real persons and we treat them as clean slates, people without histories; we regard people who are different as a threat, and are afraid of them; we see the 'other' as someone exotic, with no need to be taken seriously; we abandon interest in those who are different; and sometimes we become so obsessed with differences that we end up 'in our own small defined camps' and never venture across borders to engage with others.

The interesting thing is that small children, left to themselves, often seem quite unaware of difference. But tragically they soon learn about it. To live in our multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic society, where extremes of poverty and wealth co-exist, our children require from us the tools to overcome suspicion of difference, learning rather to embrace it as they grow up, rejoicing in the richness it brings. And this, too, may at times require them to swim against the stream.



Living with the questions



Finally, I would like to suggest that we encourage our children to 'live with the questions' rather than always to expect (and adults feeling obliged always to provide) firm answers and explanations and certainty. Not everyone will agree with this and I don't want to sound simplistic. But this is the point I have reached in my own faith journey. It is risky – and certainly for Christians it is a departure from the idea of 'certainty' with which most of us will have been raised.



For me the risk is worth it, and I say this with my own children in mind. The risk contained in openness to other perspectives is far less troublesome to me than having to face my children's accusations about Christianity's arrogance in its attitude to other religious traditions. Children today are growing up at a time when, in contrast to the past, all religions (and no religion) have equal status in our country and in our schools. With what tools, in our homes and churches, are we equipping our children to enter into meaningful conversation with their peers with different beliefs?



Do not misunderstand me. I am not suggesting that to raise a child in a specific faith tradition with its own stories and symbols and rituals is unimportant. It is precisely this rootedness, I have come to learn, which anchors us and so sets us free to engage meaningfully with others. This is our challenge, as people of faith raising children to similarly be people of faith today.



Lyn Holness

This article was previously published in *Ragbag theologies: Essays in honour of Denise M. Ackermann, a feminist theologian of praxis*, eds Miranda Pillay, Sarojini Nadar and Clint le Bruyns (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2009).





Difficult stories

It is God's spirit
That broods upon the chaos we have wrought,
Disturbing its static wrongs,
And stirring into life the formless beginnings
Of the new and better world.

~ Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan

The story of Noah's Ark

The murder of Abel by his brother, Cain, was the first wicked thing to happen in the world. Although the people on earth now knew the difference between good and evil, as time went by, many chose to disobey God and live wicked lives. God was hurt and angry at the way people behaved. He began to regret that he had created people at all. Finally, he decided to destroy everyone in a great flood.

There was, however, one man who had pleased God. His name was Noah. So, God warned Noah about what was coming and told him to build a huge boat. 'I am going to put an end to people, because the earth is filled with violence,' said God. 'I am going to destroy all life under the heavens in a flood. But, I promise that you and your family will be saved.'

God told Noah exactly what shape and size to build the large wooden ark in which his family would escape the floods. Noah was to coat it inside and out with tar to make it waterproof. Then God said, 'You are to take into the ark two of every living creature, male and female, to keep them alive with you.' 'Also take with you food of every kind for your family and the animals.'

So, Noah did everything that God had told him. Then he and his sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, took their wives on to the ark. One week after the people and animals were safely aboard the ark, the first drop of rain splashed down. Then it rained and rained. It rained for forty days and forty nights, until the rivers and seas rose and flooded the land. Soon, even the tops of the mountains had disappeared and every other

creature in the world had drowned. Noah and his family floated safely in the ark on a deep and endless ocean.

After many weeks, the rain stopped. God sent a strong wind to blow and, gradually, the waters began to go down. One hundred and fifty days later, the water level had sunk so much that the ark came to rest on the mountains of





Ararat. But Noah and his family still did not dare leave it. Six weeks later, Noah opened a tiny window in the ark and sent out a raven. It just flew around in circles waiting for the tree tops to appear. Then Noah sent out a dove to see if the water had gone from the surface of the ground. But the dove could find nowhere to settle, so it returned to the ark.

A week later, Noah once again let the dove fly away. This time she flew back with an olive leaf in her beak. Now Noah knew that there was something alive and growing in the world. After another week had gone by, the dove went on her third flight. She did not return, so Noah knew she had found somewhere to live.

Then Noah and his family removed the huge roof covering the ark and saw that the surface of the ground was dry. God said to Noah, 'Come out of the ark. Your family is safe. Bring the animals out and let them go free to roam the earth and multiply.'

Noah and his family were very happy to be out of the huge boat and back on land again. They made an altar and offered gifts to God to thank him for sparing their lives. God was pleased with Noah and blessed him and his sons. 'Go and have many children,' said God. 'Spread out and fill the earth. I give you charge of everything that is in the world. All that lives and moves will be food for you.'

God promised Noah that he would never again send a flood to destroy the earth. He called this promise his covenant. 'I have put a rainbow in the sky,' said God, 'and it will be a sign to remind you that I will always keep my covenant with you and everything on the earth that lives.'

So, after that time people in the world knew that if it rained they should not be afraid. Whenever the sun shone through the clouds a rainbow appeared, and then everyone remembered God's promise to Noah.



'new beginnings are possible
but not without new endings'
(Shabbir Banoobhai)

Dear God,

The biblical texts you entrusted us with can be very difficult and complex. Can you not communicate more directly with us? Instead you choose to speak to us through stories that go back 3000 years and were written down and edited by men who believed themselves to be superior to and more important than women. It continues to amaze me that you were not too proud to use the lives of these men with clay feet to communicate profound truths about our existence and your relationship to us. For at times their texts are more like mirrors that tell us about them, their reflections and assumptions, their ways of seeing you, making us aware of the ongoing danger of creating a God in our own image. How violent and angry and terrifying and vengeful and human you then can be!

But then there are moments where texts open up like windows allowing us to see through our own reflections, pulling us beyond ourselves into the mystery of your faithful presence, transforming us more and more into your image. How gentle, patient, forgiving and hopeful you can be! Our difficulty is of course to know when a text is a mirror and when a window, when to trust and when to be suspicious.

The story of Noah and the Ark is a good example. At the beginning you set the stage by announcing you will use violence to eradicate violence. But at the end you are moved to compassion and promise us 'Never again!' We witness a change of heart, not within us, but within you. You realise that we will not change. And so you decide to change strategy, so that our story with you can continue. We see the same heart that in Christ would rather suffer violence than demand or impose it. Mirror or window? Do you continue to change or do our perceptions of you keep changing? The latter seems more plausible, and yet some might argue that again I am creating you in my own image. But whatever our perspective may be, now when we look at Christ we hear you, forgiving and not condemning, with us and not against, fully human, sharing in the suffering of the innocent and yet praying for the perpetrators for forgiveness, 'for they do not know what they are doing'. The new ark seems to be big enough to rescue and save the good and the bad. There is hope. There is a rainbow which signals that both new endings and new beginnings are possible!

Yours faithfully,

Rev. Dr Robert Steiner

'Autobiography is not important. Authenticity is important. The writer must fire herself through the text, be the molten stuff that welds together disparate elements. I believe there is always exposure, vulnerability, in the writing process, which is not to say it is either confessional or memoir. Simply, it is real.'

(Jeanette Winterson)

Dear parents,

What is it about the story of Noah and the Ark that holds such enduring fascination for children? And does a story that narrates the destruction of the whole earth, including almost all of its inhabitants and animals, belong in a children's bible? As readers and storytellers we too have to expose ourselves, make ourselves vulnerable. We must fire ourselves through the text, 'be the molten stuff that welds together disparate elements'. One could argue that biblical stories of disaster are as cathartic as the violent and cruel fairy tales we read to our children. They touch and speak to deep-seated anxieties, and confront children with the struggle of survival as an unavoidable reality of life on this planet. In addition, the carefully planned rescue of Noah and his family shows how in the end life triumphs over forces of death, chaos and destruction. Noah's ark promises a womb-like place of safety and warmth in the midst of great storms.

I remember as a child always identifying with Noah and his family, and experiencing the story as one of hope and rescue. By the time all the various animals had made it into the ark and the gates were closed those destined

to drown in the floods were forgotten. I imagined the waters rising and rejoiced in a successful rescue mission, anticipating the beautiful colours of the rainbow. I did wonder how Noah and his family managed to feed all these animals and how a lion and a sheep could board the same ship. It is interesting that while the biblical story does indeed spend little time and detail on the fate of those left behind, there are graphic and dramatic Christian depictions of the story that focus on the despair of those clinging to the ark from the outside. But it is too late. Their fate is sealed.

Some Jewish scholars are not impressed with Noah. He made little effort to persuade God to show mercy to the world for the sake of the just and innocent. His concern was in the end only for his own. Abraham is therefore held in higher esteem than Noah! He dared to challenge God's mathematics and got him to accept that 10 righteous would be sufficient to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is the kind of logic that finds its fulfilment in the Gospel truth that Jesus, the one innocent and righteous who is able to intercede and save not just a city but the whole world. And in some ways the end of the story of Noah and the Ark points in a similar direction. For there we do not encounter an angry tyrant but a creator who grieves over his creation and the human heart that does not seem able to change its hostile nature. The only way forward that holds a future for the world is a change in the heart of God. The rainbow symbolises the 'never again' of violent punishment from God's side, no matter how well deserved. Instead God commits to long-suffering compassion as the only way to bring about renewal and newness.

There have been attempts to read the story symbolically. The story of Noah and the Ark in the opening chapters of the first book in the Bible is seen to mark the culmination (or rather low point) of story upon story that illustrates human violence spiralling more and more out of control. The primordial floods of chaos, contained and ordered in the process of God's creation, are now once again unleashed, echoing and symbolising the destructive power with which human violence floods history. This culture of violence has been with us from the beginning and continues to jeopardise all the progress we have made in other areas of life. Martin Luther King's warning seems to be more relevant than ever: 'It is no longer a choice between violence and

nonviolence in this world; it's non-violence or non existence'. The devastation in Pakistan since the onset of heavy monsoon rains sadly illustrates the direct result of irresponsible exploitation of and human violence against the earth. These floods have killed more than 1600 people, left more than 6 million homeless and affected, a total population of 17 million, covering a fifth of Pakistan - an area the size of Italy.



God-made or manmade?

What will shockingly by some be interpreted

as God's punishment proves to be to a large extent the result of our foolishness and shameless exploitation of the earth's resources. Global warming might be one explanation. But a recent article in the Cape Times listed a whole range of other determining factors: poor land management; outdated irrigation systems; illegal logging; timber Mafia; lack of trees leading to soil erosion and exhaustion, naturally retaining water; overgrazing by livestock common in rural Pakistan, removing layers of topsoil and stunting growth, further reducing the soil's ability to hold water. Without vital topsoil, flash-flooding in northern, mountainous areas results in silt being sent downstream, which then reduces the amount of water the river channel can hold. It is clear how our lack of respect of and loyalty to the earth and its delicate eco-system results in devastating endings. From a theological perspective such unfaithfulness to the earth is always also unfaithfulness to its creator. The disrespect for a given order leads to catastrophic consequences, not because of some form of God's punishment, but because of the natural consequences that are inherent in the choices we make. What the story perceives as God's will and action from a wisdom perspective can be interpreted with a deed-consequence logic. But at the end of the story God is no longer the one who enforces the given order of creation but takes sides and suffers with creation, leaving behind the scheme of retribution, instead embracing compassion as the all-determining principle. Whatever catastrophes the earth and humankind have to endure, they can no longer be interpreted as being rooted in God's wrath and rejection.

Yours, Robert

'Rainbows apologise for angry skies.'
(Sylvia Voirol)

Dear Luca and Lola,

The rainbow never stops fascinating you. How many rainbows have we seen on our way to school in the morning? And every time I sensed excitement, awe and wonder in your voices. My heart also warms at the sight of a rainbow. Its colourful but subtle presence is somehow reassuring. I am not surprised that our ancestors believed that every rainbow must be a sign straight from God. When Noah and his family left the ark after weeks of rains and floods they saw the rainbow in the sky and believed that God was giving them a special promise. Noah somehow heard God saying at that moment: 'Never again will I be the one sending such rains and floods. No matter how much human beings mess things up, I will not use any form of violence to punish them. Instead I will wait patiently for them to understand when and where they have gone wrong. And then I will help them to learn from their mistakes, forgive them and remind them that I will be always on their side and would rather suffer with them than punish them. Human beings might give up on each other and even on me, but I will always remember them and never stop believing in them. After all they are all my creation!'

It is because of the beautiful sign of the rainbow, Luca and Lola, that I don't agree with those who still think that God sends floods and earthquakes and other terrible disasters to punish people. No, God promises to be on our

side when terrible things happen, giving us strength and wisdom to cope with it, filling us with love and compassion to support each other instead of blaming each other.

We now understand that many of the terrible floods you see reported in the newspaper are the result of our own mistakes. We continue to be very irresponsible when it comes to caring for our earth. But we finally begin to understand that we need the trees not only to have enough fresh air to breathe but also to prevent the soil from being washed away and turn into dangerous mud slides. We begin to understand that building artificial water channels and changing the direction of river beds can be very dangerous when hard, long rains hit us. I am glad that science helps us more and more to understand the origins of many natural disasters. Hopefully we will learn from past mistakes.

It is not too late and every new rainbow reminds us that we are not alone in our struggle to survive. When Jesus made this earth his home he continued to remind us about God's love for his creation. He too called us to remain faithful to this place no matter how difficult it is at times. We are not called to build a new ark to save ourselves when things get tough. We should do better than Noah. We are called to make the whole earth our ark, a safe place for everyone, as we continue to sail through the vast and hostile universe.

xxx
Dad

Heart talks with Mother God

Since God is transcendent, beyond all naming and images, and no image can adequately describe the incomprehensible mystery of God, any image we use is limited. Every image that describes God is simultaneously both true and false. Each image that describes who God is both enriches and limits our understanding of God. No language about God can ever reflect fully the divine mystery. God is so much more than we have ever imagined or known. It is true, for example, that God's love for us is like a loving father's, who is always ready to forgive us our failings. But it is, simultaneously, false; for God is much more than a forgiving father.

Jesus uses different images to tell us what God is like. Jesus called God 'Abba' and described God as a loving father or dad who loves us. Jesus didn't mean that God is a biological father with a male body. When Jesus said: 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9), he did not intend that this comparison be taken literally to mean that Jesus reveals a male Father God. Jesus was not establishing the gender of God, but rather Jesus' use of 'Abba' encompassed motherly love.

God-language and children



At an early age children imagine a masculine God. In churches they hear God referred to as 'he' 'Father', 'Lord', 'king'. Although the growing usage of inclusive language is causing this practice to change, and forward-thinking homilists will not be guilty of it, in many churches the sole use of the masculine God is still the norm. Masculine images of God are understood literally by young children. They cannot comprehend a transcendent God who is beyond all images when what they hear and see present God in masculine metaphors only. Exclusive masculine images limit God and present a narrow and inadequate understanding of God. For example, Noreen, a young mother, in chatting about God with her four-year-old daughter Louise,



referred to God as 'she'. Louise quickly disagreed with her mother: 'No, Mommy, God is not a woman, he is a man'. Her mother, taken by surprise, replied: 'God can be female and male'. But Louise went over to the bookcase and removed one of her children's prayerbooks from the shelf and opened it up to a picture of God: 'See, Mommy, God is a man who lives up on a cloud in the sky!'

Feminine images of God in scripture

Scripture uses feminine images to describe God's motherly womb love for us. For example: God is like a woman in labour who gasps, pants, and cries out as the contractions begin (Isa 42:14; Job 38:8; John 16:21). God is like a nurturing mother feeding her suckling infant at her breast (Isa 49:15; 66:11-13). 'But I have calmed and quieted my soul, / like a weaned child with its mother; / my soul is like the weaned child that is with me' (Ps 131:2). God is like a midwife who guides the baby as it comes out of the mother's womb (Ps 22:9-10).

In the Song of Moses God describes herself in motherly imagery: 'You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you: /you forgot the God who gave you birth' (Deut 32:18). God is like a mother eagle who teaches her young eaglets to fly (Deut 32:11-12). Like a strong mother who tries to protect her children from danger, God wants her children to know that she watches over them always (Eccl 4:11); God is like a grandmother who shares traditions and family secrets with her grandchildren (Ps 128:5); Mary, Mother of Jesus, shows us that God's mothering love always finds us, never lets us stay lost (Luke 2:42-48). Mary shows us that Mother God gives away her most precious gift, Jesus (Luke 2:1-16).





Jesus and feminine images

Jesus used feminine images to show us what God is like. Comparing the experience of a woman giving birth to the Christian's need for rebirth, Jesus revealed to Nicodemus the importance of being born of the spirit in order to experience the kingdom of God (John 3:1-21). Jesus described God as a homemaker who searches for a lost coin (Luke 15:8-10) and as a bakerwoman who takes yeast and mixes it with flour to make bread (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:20). Jesus also tells us that God is like a mother hen who proudly gathers her chicks under her wings (Matt 23:37).

Rationale for the use of feminine images

Teaching children to pray with feminine images of God at an early age is important because it provides a corrective to masculine-only images of God. Miriam Therese Winter, in a 1993 interview reported in *U.S. Catholic*, points out that 'The biblical texts were written by men, assembled by men, edited by men, chronologically arranged by men, interpreted by men, preached upon by men, commended by men; therefore we have a very male perspective on the tradition'. Introducing children to the wealth of images for God, including both masculine and feminine metaphors, helps them to experience the richness of God's nature. It provides children with an inclusive way of exploring the divine mystery. It provides an antidote to the centuries of predominately masculine imagery. It provides a more integrated and fuller understanding of who God is. Each feminine image of God presents another dimension understanding of the mystery of God. It builds a theology of female and male created equally in God's image, free to develop their spiritual potential as partners and



disciples. It gives little girls the same gender identification with God as little boys have always had. A girl's letter to God demonstrates this need: 'Dear God, are boys better than girls? I know you are one but try to be fair'.

That girls and women can identify with God as daughters in the same way that boys and men unconsciously feel their connection to God as sons is the conclusion of Virginia Ann Froehle in *Called into Her Presence*. When women embrace the Divine Feminine within them, they can experience a deeper sense of self-worth and empowerment. A woman shared, 'Visualising God as female makes me feel strong and confident. I am now more willing to be a risk taker'. Another woman commented she also discovered a deeper sense of connectedness with God and all creation, 'When I pictured God as a woman in labour, panting and screaming through labour contractions, my image of creation changed. God was not far removed, up there somewhere, calling life forth; but rather, was passionately involved in the birthing of creation. I had a deep sense that in God's womb all people, all God's creatures, all creation are somehow interconnected.

Little boys and men equally need the balance which feminine imagery meditation provides, for their spiritual breadth has also been stunted by a predominance of masculine images. To cite Jann Aldredge Clanton's *In whose Image*: 'Men may not be aware of the extent to which masculine God-language also alienates men from portions of themselves, from others, and from God. ... Patriarchal society has taught men not to reveal their weaknesses, especially to other men. Therefore when God is male, they cannot be completely open and honest even with God'.

God language and spirituality

The inclusive God-language changes which the church is preparing are as important for men as for women. Feminine images of God can expand men's spiritual potential by helping them discover and affirm the feminine in themselves. Men need no longer be afraid of their own healthy feminine attributes. 'If our spirituality cannot embrace femininity, then it remains incomplete, unrealised. Spirituality in a man does require a denial of the feminine as an essential

part of ourselves – and of our God’. When the day dawns when we can comfortably call God ‘Mother’ as well as ‘Father’, both men and women recognise themselves more fully as images of God.

Episcopal Bishop Moore contents that the church must demonstrate a balance of gender for the spiritual growth of both men and women. He believes that the one reason that more women than men participate in church is that our God-images are male. He reflects, ‘If the objects of devotion are only male, one cannot fully experience one’s own spirituality. Everyone’s prayer life is impoverished if we can only relate to a male God’.

Men and women need to be liberated from an understanding of religion that identifies God with maleness. We want to expand human consciousness of the divine to step beyond gender to gender-transcendence. God is always immensely more than any metaphor can provide. The God language and images we hand down to our children and grandchildren have the potential to transform everything – the way we see ourselves, the way we relate to God and to one another, our economic, political, social structures—indeed, to create a new paradigm where all human beings live in mutuality, justice, equality, and love.

Extract from *Heart Talks with Mother God* by Bridget Mary Meehan and Regina Madonna Oliver (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995).





Living stories

If I could personally ask God one question and get a response, I would ask: 'How are you?'
God probably gets tired of people asking such deep philosophical questions. I would ask 'How are you? Just let it all out', and listen to what God has to say.

~ Danielle Shay

Challenged by our children

Our youngest daughter Jane, always a fiery little thing, called me into her bedroom one day when she was about six, and asked me to sit down.

‘I’m very angry’, she announced.

‘Oh yes?’ I replied. ‘Why are you angry?’

‘How come’, she asked, ‘all the important babies in the Bible are boys? There must have been some important girl babies born. And another thing, why are there no angels in the Bible with girls’ names?’

I responded that of course there were important girl babies born in Bible times, and of course there are girl angels – and then I had to do some quick thinking! Not to gloss over the issue, but to respond to it wisely. I needed to acknowledge to Jane that she was making a very valid point, but without damaging her trust in the Bible and its stories.

It proved to be a good opportunity to do two things. The first was to explain that the Bible was written mainly by men, and that for a very long time men have thought that they are more important than women. I explained that things were changing now, and that lots of people were starting to realise that girls and boys are equally special to God. The second thing was to explain that when God asked people to write down all the things he (or she) was doing for them, God knew that the people would get some things wrong and maybe twist the stories a bit, but that God was still able to use these people even though they made mistakes. That’s why we still read and need the Bible. It shows us how God loves and believes in people like us who get things wrong sometimes, instead of saying that we’re no use at all.

That was enough. Jane was pacified. I learned early on as a parent that it is folly to try and answer more than the immediate question a child is asking...

Lyn Holness

When Julia was about four or five she asked: Is God also a girl? I suppose because we were a mother–daughter family, with a girl dog Sasha, and a girl horse, Ankje (Julia owned a horse) and girl budgie, she assumed God, too, must be a girl. I left it at that because her view of woman/girl/daughter was complete – it all formed part of the same continuum for her.

Rhoda Kadalie

Why doesn't God answer all our prayers and wishes? Does God know everything? God is the only one that's perfect, hey Mom?

Tessa Ackermann



Something my first born, Anna, commented on when she was probably around ten or eleven was that God seemed horribly full of himself and she just didn't like that attitude at all!

That was in response to 'You will love your God with all your heart and all your might etc. and you shall have no other God's before him'. I was always rather struck by that, and I have absolutely no memory of what I replied. I may well, then as now, have been struck dumb for an answer!

Doreen Scott

I was reading 'The Little Red Fox' for the umpteenth time to my girls. Six-year-old Nicola knew it off by heart, so although I was tired and rushing to get them to sleep, I couldn't skip or change a word!

Three-year-old Robyn was never a good listener and I was aware that she was staring at my mouth as I sat on her bottom bunk reading.

As Ferdinand was about to be discovered hiding under the bridge, Robs interrupted:

'Mom, is there someone inside you "what" makes you talk?'

A Mother has to be quick thinking even when she is exhausted.

'Yes' I said. 'I'm inside me'.

'Oh,' said Robs almost with a sigh of relief. 'I thought Jesus was inside you'. (Sunday School influence? So she did listen sometimes!)

Big Sister Nicola nearly fell off the top bunk giggling in disdain. 'Oh, don't be so stupid, Robyn. With all that blood and bones inside her, how can there be room for Jesus?!'

Dawn Woods

How do people get to heaven? Do you have to climb up a rope? What is heaven like? My answer is that when we die all our loved ones are waiting for us, and they are so happy to see us again that it is like a wonderful party. When my kids were smaller I would tell them it probably had balloons and lovely music and everyone was laughing and smiling and hugging and saying 'we've been waiting for you, we're so happy that you're finally here'. When their grandparents died I told them of how their own parents and siblings were waiting so longingly to see them again and how you were young and strong again and all your beloved pets and friends were all there waiting for you. And that one day granny and grandpa would be waiting for us so there was nothing to fear because the first faces we would see when we died were familiar and loving.

Fiona McLennan

My children do not wrestle with questions of faith. In fact they have on many occasions helped me hold my own questions differently. At twelve and nine their time of questioning is probably still ahead of them, but at the moment their faith is like that which Jesus encourages. They are able to hold contradictions and hold hope.

Last year I learnt valuable lesson from my daughter in this regard. She had found an abandoned bird's egg and was trying to keep it warm to incubate it. I noticed her awe and wonder at the possibility of new life. I was struck by her wholehearted nurturing of that potential or possibility. At 11 she knew the odds were stacked against her as she had tried incubating 'lost' eggs many times and each time had to throw away the egg when it was clear that it held no life. The ability to have faith in new



life while also holding the possibility that the outcome may well not be what she wants, assisted me as I grappled with the question of how I can hold hope (as a Christian) while surrounded by despair. It also prompted a new question in me -how do I restore awe and wonder into a journey of waiting.

Mimi Saayman

Chris and Avril dropped Jessica off at my place when they went to the cinema. She was excited and keen to tell me about her first day at 'big' school. Then she became quiet.

'What's wrong?' I asked. 'Did some of the children tease you? Can't be, you're such a lovely little girl.'

'No, nothing's wrong, but, you know, there's a boy in my class who doesn't believe in God.'

I was quite surprised and intrigued about the 'theological discussion' between these two very young children. I knew that I couldn't simplify an 'explanation' about the existence or not of God. Instead I asked her: 'Tell me, Jessica, is the boy perhaps Moslem?'

'Yes,' she said, surprised. 'He told me. What does it mean?'

'Well, perhaps he has another name for God and he calls Him Allah.'

'Oh,' she said, but she didn't seem totally convinced. 'What about Jesus? He was the son of God and He was born on earth to tell us about God. That's what daddy told me.'

'Yes, we call the Son of God, Jesus. He was also a prophet, like a teacher. Your little friend could tell you about another prophet, Mohammed. He was also born on earth and told the people about Allah.'

'Think about it like this: you and Emily are both girls but you don't have the same name.'

'I see,' she said and smiled. She was happy that her new 'boy' friend was not so different after all.

Hanni van den Heever



When my eldest daughter Siobhan was seven, she asked me how we knew that 'our' God was the real one, when Muslims think it is Allah. Her five-year-old sister, Tara, immediately chipped in. 'I know! I know!' and retold the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. 'Our God is real because he sent the fire.' But Siobhan was not so easily convinced. 'That's a story in the Bible, but Mommy said in her lecture that not all stories in the Bible REALLY happened the way it says'. Ouch!

Jessie Rogers

Alyssa (aged 4,5) a few days after a communion service at church asked. 'Where did they get Jesus' blood from?', and, 'Where did they put it?'

Alyssa (aged 7) had a favourite pet guinea-pig that died, and was naturally very upset. We buried it in the garden, and made a special grave for it. She wanted to know where it had gone, so we talked about it being in heaven, and how nice it must be in heaven. She thought about this, and then said, if it is in heaven it must be with God, and so she decided to write a letter to God. It was all beautifully illustrated, and said:

'Dear God, Please may I have a book about "Snowy" in heaven. Love Alyssa'

She put the letter out in the garden at the grave site, and waited for a reply. After a few days she became very upset, and couldn't understand why God wouldn't answer her.

How does one respond? I didn't want to put something there for her to find, as I felt it would create unrealistic expectations. We talked about how God listens to us, and knows what is happening, but sometimes answers us in different ways, and in ways that we might not expect.



Tessa (aged 5) said recently, 'God has a play dough table up in the sky, where he lives.'
-Oh, and what does he make, Tess?

'He makes creatures, and puts them in the wild!'

Tessa (aged 4,5) was full of questions about God – Can you see God? Can you hear God? Or talk to God? Where is

God? Is God in our hearts?

I was trying to explain that God is everywhere, and sometimes we think of God being part of us, so perhaps God is in our hearts ...

'Well, I don't want God to be in my heart. There is too much blood there!'

I then explained about our soul, and our heart as a place where we love.

'Oh ... God is in my blood pressure'!!

Claudine Harrison

Learning from children

Having the privilege of participating in teaching in Sunday school, I have found there a little gold mine of responses to the great stories of our faith by the children, which have taught me to listen, observe, and be in some awe at what they say. If given a chance, you will hear more than in many other contexts about the real needs of our world, for food, for empathy, for prayer, and the marvellous ministry that so-called 'child-like faith' brings. Almost a teaching in reverse – from the bottom up – which reminds me so often of Jesus' words that we need to become like little children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. I suppose it is a privileged space, not to have to be getting children ready for exams, or for school sport events, driven by the dictates of the daily round – but a dive into another world of stories, of heroes and non-heroes, touching the edges of our faith, and sometimes coming right up against its very core.



I have found out how much children enjoy moaning and complaining to God, loudly wailing (as the Israelites in the Wilderness) that they're hungry, and thirsty, blaming their leaders for leading them up the garden path, when they could be much better back in Egypt, where all was fat and easy, in spite of the slavery. They gave God stick, and Moses as well for this endurance battle he'd pitched them into! I was secretly delighted at their fed-upness, and thought, 'Yes, I could do with a dose of this, quite regularly!' It was the frankness, the honesty, their staying with the feelings, and their ability to identify so directly with the complaining Israelites that suddenly brought to life for me the struggle of a nomad people, uprooted and insecure during the Exodus journey – and our own frustrations and anger here, as we try to journey to a home for all in our own country. And then the children's confidence that, moans and all, they could berate God but also ask him for help,

and he would send them strange manna to eat, and little quails, and Moses' stick would release gushing water from the rock for them to quench their thirst. The peculiar happenings, the oddness of it all, satisfied something deep down in them – and in me, observing them!



Did you know that our children are attending schools where bread is sent out every day to children in schools where many are hungry – and that some of their schools provide porridge when they arrive, because there's no breakfast in those homes? The children's awareness of hunger as a fact of life for many children, their concern – and their sense of pride, of gratification that they belong to caring schools who are actively addressing the issue, was an eye-opener for me. It pointed so clearly to the critical role of education in its broadest sense, including not just the 3 Rs but our whole human condition as well. And gave me new hope in the quality of social concern in some of our schools, and a thankfulness that our children are part of that.



I've also learnt that children are acutely aware of who helps them when they're sick and miserable. 'My parents, my teacher, my friend' are seen as the healers primarily – of course the doctors, nurses, physios and counsellors are there too – but it was



wonderful to hear how immediately they cited those closest to them as their major resource when distressed. It says something about the quality of parenting our children have, of the role their teachers play, the importance of friends – and the need for us to value them properly.

And I witnessed a ‘healing’ taking place in our very midst. We were acting out the story of Jesus’ healing of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, and the children, with much hilarity, were acting out the sick one with the fever, the disciples bringing Jesus along – and then the encounter happened. ‘Jesus’ sat quietly on the bed of the giggling ‘mother-in-law’, saying nothing, but just taking her hand and sitting. Suddenly the giggling stopped, and Jesus asked ‘How are you feeling?’ The story became real. Mother-in-law, suddenly feeling her illness, became calm as Jesus held her hand and after a minute or so, replied seriously ‘I feel much better now’. ‘Can you get up?’ asked Jesus. Slowly and calmly, she got up – a moment almost, of solemnity, of cleansing and new health. And then we had a feast to celebrate her healing!

Such moments give a glimpse into the Kingdom of Heaven, and the ministry that children are to us.

Judy Cooke

A theology of play

'You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.'
(Plato)

Every few months I go to the aquarium and watch the seals swoop and dive together in endless rhythms. Their interactive playfulness mesmerises me. I remember my own social playfulness as a small child and the seriousness with which I took my imaginary games, and sometimes wonder, in the busy cycle of my fairly responsible adult life, where that little girl has gone. Many adults can easily see play as a childish thing, to be put aside in favour of hard work and responsibilities as we 'grow up'. Even our leisure time can quickly either become a new list of achievements or a passive exhausted slumping in front of the TV. Recently at Sundays@Belmont, we briefly encountered together the art of play, enabling us both to see and engage briefly with others in a different way. In a world where we can often feel overwhelmed by responsibilities, burnt out by the pressures of achievement and production and stressed by the busy-ness of life, time out to play can be hard to find.

Play goes beyond the categories of doing, having and achieving and leads us into the categories of being, of authentic human



Street youth surf the waves of Durban at Umthombo Streetchild's pioneering play programmes

existence and demonstrative rejoicing in it. It emphasises the creative against the productive and the aesthetic against the ethical (Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*)

Moltmann is well known for his books on the crucified and suffering God. I was therefore excited recently to discover dog-eared copies of two lesser-known books of

his on Joy and Play. My reading inspired first a Sundays@Belmont on Play and then a series of sermons inspired by Play. In 2011 we also hope to reconceptualise our children's ministry in more playful terms. I realise that in many ways my work over the years with children, as a horse riding instructor, camp counsellor, Sunday school teacher and street project volunteer has always involved some form of play but it has ironically been in my development work with HOPEHIV in poor communities across Africa that I have most fully seen the transforming nature of play in the lives of those who suffer, rather than merely as a luxury of the wealthy.

Play can imaginatively open us up to fresh possibilities – the street child who sees himself as the loser in life can suddenly become the winner riding the surf waves, the gangster thug seen as the rubbish of the streets becomes the hero who scores the winning goal. We all need to stay in touch with the possibilities of life. But it can be most significant for those who can struggle to see any good possibility in their lives due to their life circumstances. It stimulates hope to imagine that things can be different, to change the rules of the game.

'How can we play and laugh when children starve in our world?' asks Moltmann. He cuts to the heart of the discomfort that many of us can feel at enjoying ourselves in a world marred by so much suffering and pain. And yet he suggests that if we are fully to embrace our humanness, we need to reclaim play as a liberating and transforming force in our midst. And in this art, young people are often our best teachers.

Selina Palm

'We don't stop playing because we grow old;
we grow old because we stop playing.'
(George Bernard Shaw)



Orphaned and vulnerable children learn to trust again through play at kids clubs in Malawi

The Lord's Prayer

The confirmation group at RUC recently rewrote the Lord's Prayer as an activity to contextualise its meaning. The following is a selection of their prayers written during this activity.

Dear lovely being,
You are amazing.
One day your house will be on earth
And you'll take care of all of us.
Please feed us and love us.
We don't always do good things,
Help us through and don't give up on us.
Help us to find adventure and love
We are all paint, so
Smudge us, blur us, smear us and
Blend us together
Forever and ever
Amen

My Brada in the Sky
Coz the world is so wide
In the Heavens you are
Which is very far
Give us tomorrow our Gatsby
For you are very fancy
Forgive those who steal from us
As they forgive us.
For you are in the heavens
With the power and the Glory
4 ever and ever
Amen

My creator which I can't see
Hello to you
I'll join your home one of these years
What you want, can be done on earth
Like heaven (it will be hard, but possible)
I'm hungry now, I want my food.
Forgive me for whatever I've done
And teach me not to do it again
Because I want to join your home
Amen

The big man up there
How cool is your name.
You have a great Castle
Your word will always be spread.
Give us some nice toppings for bread
And prosecute those who break into houses
And make us not do what they do
But keep us away from merchants and drugs
For your castle is still cool and you
Are so powerful, so you get all the glory,
Forever and ever and forever after that.
Amen

Our Father, who cannot be sms'd or face-booked
Allow us to always be hooked to Your Word.

While the cooler kids may find your messages old and weird
I do pray for others to hear what you Say.

You speak beyond the trend of Youth
You speak of love and truth
That consoles and comforts in the trials of school and relationships that hurt
Of parent conflicts and teacher spats.

Oh God be forever near all our troubled fears
of being too fat or failing school
Be with us between the zits of life
In times of really hectic parent strifes.

Be with us in all we do
But mostly help us develop patience, love and trust in You
While still looking ridiculously cool and free from ridicule.
Amen

⊕ N M⊕ RNING WINGS, IN ⊕ CEANS DEEP

Lord, you look at me and know me,
Every step I take, you show me.

When I rise, and when I rest,
You will always know me best.

Where I walk, or sit, or stand,
You still hold me in your hand.

And if I don't know how to pray,
You understand me, anyway.

Once when I was lost, you found me.
Then I felt your arms around me.

When I'm afraid and want to hide,
You are always by my side.

When I'm lonely, you are near,
When I'm angry, you stay here,

High as heaven bright, you greet me,
Down in darkness, too, you meet me.

You are with me everywhere:
In light and shadow, fire and air;

In every tiny grain of sand;
And in the desert, vast and grand;

On morning wings, in oceans deep;
When I'm awake, and when I sleep.



In my secret self, you made me,
In the blazing sun, you shade me.

Know me, lead me, guide my way
Through every hour of every day,

For all my life, in all I do,
Let me always be with you.

(Psalm 139 by Reeve Lindberg)

CELTIC BLESSING

God of all hearing,
God of all holding,
God of all loving,
God of all enfolding.

Above the winds, hear me.
Upon the sea, hold me.
On lonely island, love me.
In dark night, enfold me.

M O V E M E N T S

Whenever 'hear', 'hold', 'love' and 'enfold' are used in the prayer, do the following actions:

Hear - hands behind ears

Hold - hands form a vessel

Love - hands cross the heart

Enfold - hands and arms hug the other





'Burying Iggie' by Peter van Straten