-THE CHILD ON THE SHORE

PART 1

Godly Play UK began on the best of days and in the best of places. It was launched, two years ago, on St Nicholas's Day. Lift-off took place in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey. Nowhere could have been more fitting. A premise of Godly Play is that our growing-up in Christ means learning a language. Faith – any faith, not just Christianity – needs a language. It needs words and it is important to get those words right. Getting words right is what poets are good at. So we were in the right place.

At that launch, I was delighted to notice that under my chair was a plaque commemorating the poet Dylan Thomas. My mind immediately went back, more than half a century, to the first time I encountered Dylan Thomas. I was fifteen. I was with a hundred other boys in a school hall. I was sitting an English Literature examination. "You may open your exam paper and begin," said the invigilator. I opened the paper and, in that huge school hall, silent save for the rustling of paper and the funny noises fidgeting adolescents make, I read words that made my heart miss a beat.

"Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
The night above the dingle starry,
Time let me hail and climb
Golden in the heydays of his eyes…"

I had to answer some questions about those lines. I have absolutely no memory of what I said about them, but I recall to this day the visceral thrill they gave me. Later I read the whole of Dylan Thomas's *Fern Hill* and so I came to these lines:

…as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
In the sun that is young once only
Time let me play and be
Golden in the mercy of his means."

"Time let me play /and be Golden in the mercy of his means." That was the poet's memory of being a child on a Welsh farm. "Time let me *play* and be *golden* in the mercy of his means." If only that were the memory all grown-ups had of being a child – and of being a child in a church!

I turn to the poets today, to the poets who speak of childhood. I turn to them because they have the gift of tongues. Poets tell us what it is to be a child and they do so rather better than most books on child psychology. I also turn to the poets because I have Jerome Berryman's backing in doing so. In his latest book, to which I'll return, he stresses the importance of poetry in the creative process.

I take my title *The Child on the Shore* from four poems. The first is the most famous poem about childhood, William Wordsworth's *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*

from Recollections of Early Childhood. Wordsworth says in that poem that "we come from God who is our home". That is a claim most of us would agree with. But Wordsworth also says that we come "trailing clouds of glory". We're not so sure about that. The "clouds", trailed by some children we meet, are hardly glorious. Many of the children I met as a parish priest in Hackney, in the East End of London, didn't seem to be "trailing clouds of glory". There was little glory about the gangs of them, hardly out of primary school, defending their turf with their blades and their guns.

Even in nicer, better-off places those clouds of glory soon pass - alas, with our encouragement. We target children as consumers. We scramble their minds with screened pulp, while putting insane pressures on them to achieve. We seduce children into supposing that it is cool to be sexy. We envelop their relationships with grown-ups in a miasma of mistrust. So we write our names on the millstones reserved for those who cause little ones to stumble.

Those "clouds of glory" quickly fade. Today we fear that Wordsworth was as misty-eyed about children as he was about daffodils. But, that said, we must not write him off too soon. We do come from God who is our home and, however fleetingly, something of where we come from lingers. And, as grown-ups, we still catch occasional glimpses of what we once saw more clearly. As Wordsworth put it, "Though inland far we be", we can, in imagination, "see the children sport upon the shore, and hear the mighty waters rolling evermore".

My second poem – a "prose-poem" we must call it, I suppose – is by the great Indian teacher, whose day will surely come again, Rabindranath Tagore. It is entitled "On the Seashore".

> "On the seashore of endless worlds children meet…They build their houses with sand, and they play with empty shells… Children have their play on the seashore of the worlds."

"Children have their play on the seashore of the worlds."

My third poem is a disturbing one, Matthew Arnold's "To a Gipsy Child by the Sea-shore". The poet sees this Romany child, standing quite still and rather sadly, just watching the sea, and wondering. Just watching and wondering. And for the poet there is something universally significant about this one lonely child. He writes:

"Thy sorrow and thy calmness are thine own:
Glooms that enhance and glorify this earth"

And a fourth poem in case you think that this is already getting far too heavy. It is from an anthology entitled "Seaside Poems". It's called "Goodness gracious!" and it's by Margaret Mahy.

"Goodness gracious, fiddle dee dee!

Somebody's grandmother's out at sea!

Just where the breakers begin to bound
Somebody's grandmother's bobbing around.

Up on the shore the people shout,
'Give us a hand and we'll pull you out!'

'No!' says the granny. 'I'm right as rain,
And I'm going to go on till I get to Spain'"

Now please may we "freeze-frame" the one image from these four poems, the image I have taken as my title for this talk, the picture of the child on the shore. ("Freeze" may be the word as winter darkens. This, I'm afraid may be a rather unseasonable talk, but never mind.)

The child on the shore. Perhaps the child has built a sand-castle at the foot of the beach and, as the tide comes in, the sea is threatening the castle walls. Perhaps the child has picked up a shell and has put it to her ear. Perhaps the child is playing a game with the sea, dancing in and out of it as the waves break on the shore. Perhaps the child is confronting the sea, throwing pebbles at it. (That's what they do on the beach at Brighton, where I live, where there isn't much sand.) Perhaps, like Matthew Arnold's lonely gypsy child, the child is just standing there at the water's edge, just standing there – wondering.

Please keep this picture in mind, the image of the child playing on the shore, as briefly we go "back to the Bible". The image of the shore, the boundary between land and sea is an important one in the Bible. When God creates the earth he separates dry land from wet sea. In the Bible's picture language, the sea is what is left of the chaos out of which God makes an ordered world. The Hebrew Bible has a spooky term for that chaos - *Tohu wa-bohu*. The sea, in the Bible, is the symbol of all we cannot grasp or control. It is both mysterious and menacing. There is always the fear that it will return and engulf us, as it did in the Flood, even though God promises that that won't happen. There's still that fear, even though God has drawn a line in the sand, even though he has told the sea to stay in its place, even though he has said, "Hitherto shalt thou come but no further, and here shall thy proud waves be stayed."

And it is because, in the Bible, the sea is so fearsome that those terrified fishermen ask, "Who is this that even the winds *and the sea* obey him?"

There are certain images, buried deep in our collective subconscious, which exercise great power over us. The sea is one such image. That explains the primal fear that seizes us when the boundary between land and sea is transgressed. Hence our terror of the tsunami and our dread that, as everything gets warmer, the seas are rising.

I am trying to convey why it is that I find this image of the child *playing* on the shore so fascinating and so suggestive. The land is where, in every way, we are on firm ground,

where we know where we are, where we are in charge. The sea is what is beyond, what is both beyond our understanding and beyond our control, "the transcendent", if you like. The sea is wonderful, but it is, at the same time, fearful.

And, at this boundary between land and sea, between *here* where we are safe, and *there* where, most certainly, we are not safe, children play. Children play on the shore, close to the water's edge. We grown-ups move "inland", as Wordsworth puts it. We retreat to our deckchairs and newspapers higher up the beach, if not back to our desks and laptops.

Children are at home at the edge, at the frontier between what appears and what is. Children explore what lies beyond. Does it need repeating that this drive to press beyond, to reach out to the transcendent, is as hard-wired into us as the urge to find food or to find a mate? Yes, we do need to say it again, because the truth has not yet sunk in, certainly not in our schools and churches. Our spiritual awareness is an innate faculty, an inborn dimension of our humanity. It is an understanding of how we are that rests on hard data, on empirical evidence. The evidence is equally strong, alas, that while the spiritual will flourish if nurtured, it will wither and die if starved.

I am going to invite us to pause now and to take the first of two short breaks in this presentation. Please brood for a few moments on this image of "the child on the shore". See this picture in your mind's eye, the picture of the child at the water's edge, the child there at the boundary between the known and the unknown, where what is familiar and safe meets what is strange and disturbing. Let's mull over for a few minutes what this image suggests to us. And let's do so in the light of what the image of the sea suggests in the Bible – the sea as mysterious and wonderful, but also threatening; the sea as the symbol of all that is in every way beyond us.

Perhaps you'd like to compare notes with a neighbour about what this image of "the child on the shore" says to you. And if that doesn't immediately suggest very much, one way to start might be simply to swap childhood memories of being a child at the seaside.

PART 2

I paused on the question: What does this image of 'the child on the shore" say to us about our children.

I turn now to two more poets who I hope will help us. The first is neglected; the second is misunderstood. The first poet is Walter de la Mare; the second poet is Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps they should be poets-laureate of the Godly Play movement.

Walter de la Mare died in 1956, soon to be forgotten – apart, that is, from one haunting poem, *The Listeners*

"Is there anybody there?" said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door…"

De la Mare died before the Godly Play movement was born. But I believe that he would have rejoiced – indeed that he does rejoice! - to see its day. One of his books is entitled *On the Edge.* His complete works could well have the same title. That is where all Walter de la Mare's poems and stories take us, to the edge, down to the foot of the beach where the children are playing.

Why should we blow the dust from off de la Mare's poetry – and from his prose, for he told enchanting stories too?

First, because he sees why *wondering* is so important. I invite you to ponder these lines. The poet asks a question.

"When I lie where shades of darkness
Shall no more assail mine eyes,
Nor the rain make lamentation
When the wind sighs,
How will fare the world whose wonder
Was the very proof of me?"

When I die, he asks, "How will fare the world *whose wonder was the very proof of me?*"

"Wondering" is not only a way of entering imaginatively into stories. Certainly by wondering about a Bible story we can become part of that story and make it our own. Many here will testify to how Godly Play lessons allow us to do just that. But Walter de la Mare believes that the ability to wonder is even more important. It is by wondering that the self is constituted. The capacity to wonder makes me who I am. *Admiratio ergo sum*. I wonder – therefore I am. There is the wondering which gasps "Wow!" and the wondering which asks "Why?" Wondering in both these ways makes us who we are. Hence the inestimable importance of guarding and nurturing our capacity to wonder, for, if it gutters out, we die.

"Our nature cannot be at home," said George MacDonald, "among things that are not wonderful to us."

One of de la Mare's stories is entitled *The Three Royal Monkeys*. It tells the tale of three monkeys who set out to find their father and their family home. Their father's country "lies beyond and beyond" and they must endure many perils and privations to get there. Their quest for the "beyond and beyond" is threatened by all manner of hostile forces. But to guide and protect them, the monkeys are entrusted with a magical stone. The name of that stone is"the wonderstone". And by the leading of the wonderstone, they at last find their way home.

Every boy and girl is born into the world holding that "wonderstone" in its hand. But today whole industries are dedicated to robbing the child of his or her wonderstone, to seducing the child into supposing that there is some better guide to the world's end. Such are "the principalities and powers" confronting us.

Wondering is a way of seeing. Which brings me to my second reason for honouring Walter de la Mare as one of our two poet-laureates. Much in de la Mare's work is about how children perceive. He notices that children notice. Our trouble, we grown-ups, is that we don't notice. We languish in a disenchanted world. The furniture of our lives, both animate and inanimate, has become so familiar that we overlook it. The people in the bus queue, say, or the trees in the park, impinge on our awareness as shadows of themselves. We no longer notice, as children do, that those people, those trees, are there, that they are real, *and that they are very strange indeed.*

I recognise and hugely admire in Godly Play the insistence that we notice. That insistence is there in the studied respect for the artefacts that we handle, in the requirement that we pay attention to what we are doing here and now, that we value the infinitely precious sacrament of the present moment, that we deliberately dwell on what we're doing. Nothing – nothing – we say or do is to be said or done lightly. Which, of course, does not mean that we're never light-hearted.

In another of his stories, de la Mare tells us about Maria. Maria notices. She notices a fly - an utterly ordinary housefly. She pays attention to it. Maria wanders about the house to trying to tell people what she has seen. The grown-ups are kind and indulgent, but they do not understand. The cook wants to know what the fly was doing, "nasty creature". But she misses the point. Maria sees, not what the fly's up to, but what it *is*. There's a clergyman staying in the house. He listens to Maria, but not for long. Soon he's talking about flies, how marvellously they are made and how they too enjoy their little lives. But Maria has no appetite for sermons. Maria's father suggests that she tell him all about this fly - at bedtime. She runs out to tell the gardener, but he doesn't understand either. And so it goes on. "I - have- just - seen - a - fly," she tells everybody, but no one understands. "I told you," her lip quivering, "I told you about something - and you didn't take any notice."

Finally she speaks to the gardener's boy. (Her social world incidentally is certainly remote from our own.) "Have you, Job, ever seen the only fly there ever was?" "That I have," says Job, "and avore I could catch him ee was gawn."

De la Mare's story is located in the one world of a particular house and garden. But at its end his story strays further, towards the brink of the beyond. Maria, we read, "turned away, her small head filled as if she heard a tune ages old and as sorrowful as the sounds of the tide on the unvisited shores of the ocean". "She heard a tune ages old and as sorrowful as the sounds of the tide on the unvisited shores of the ocean." Maria is "the child on the shore".

Maria is a funny little thing. Which leads me to my third reason for welcoming Walter de la Mare as a poet-laureate of Godly Play. Godly Play gives each child space to be himself or herself, however "different" that individual child may be.

Maria, who noticed the house-fly, was an odd child. Lots of de la Mare's children are odd. More than most children, they are lost in their own private worlds. They are exceptionally prey to fantasies and fears. They are too sensitive for their own good. One critic comments, "I am tempted to call these children unfortunate."

Yes, his children are odd. But please notice what the poet is doing in focussing on such children. He is highlighting in these children characteristics which belong to all children, but which, in most children, fade as they grow. His solitary children somehow keep open a window on to a greater world which most children, far too soon, are forced to close. His children are atypical but, paradoxically, what is unusual about them is what is essentially childlike. To a greater or lesser extent most children, as they grow older, come to reflect what we adults do to them, rather than expressing what they are. Walter de la Mare's exceptional children are how all children are, before we set about eradicating all their oddities and making them fit in - before, that is, we turn them into dull grown-ups.

"What are the salient characteristics of childhood?" de la Mare asks. "Children," he replies, "live in a world peculiarly their own, so much so that it is doubtful if the adult can do more than very fleetingly reoccupy that far away consciousness...Facts to them are the liveliest of chameleons. Between their dream and their reality looms no impassable abyss." Unsurprisingly de la Mare mistrusted schools. What happens to the child at school? "Gradually the childish self retires into its shell," he says. Like a hermit crab it accumulates defensive and aggressive disguises.... School rounds off the glistening angles. The individual is swamped...by the collective."

Why is the obsessive drive to raise "standards" in our schools so malign, so dangerous? Not just because devotion to the unholy trinity of "tests, targets, and tables" crowds the creative out of the curriculum. There is a greater danger. Raising standards inevitably becomes a process of standardisation. If all you're after is getting every child in your class to a certain point by the end of the year, any quirks and eccentricities will simply be a nuisance. They will impede progress. Those awkward corners must be knocked off. As the recent Cambridge Primary Review concluded, "Childhood's rich potential should be protected from a system apparently bent on pressing children into a uniform mould at an ever younger age." "Stop looking out of the window," says the teacher, "and get on with your work." Perhaps she should sometimes say, "Stop your work – and look out of the window"!

I think of one of my step-grandsons. He is a bit of a loner. He is introspective and abstracted. He doesn't always join in. He's "off with the fairies" half the time. (He's "off with the fairies" Personally, I can't think of anywhere better to be.) But his teachers and parents are anxious. They wonder whether there is something the matter with him, whether he should be "referred" to someone.

We should be far less worried than we sometimes are about the unusual little boy or girl. It is of course true that every child is unusual because each child is unique. It is equally true that there are children who are exceptional because they are damaged – and they need help.

But de la Mare's "different" children are not damaged – they're just different. How often do you hear it said of an adult that he or she is "a very private person"? That's often said of them in their obituaries. We don't think of such "private" people as people with problems. Why can't a child too be "a very private person", if that's how they are? Sometimes "the private child" turns out to be "the prophet child". John the Baptist was a "prophet child". "The child grew," the gospel tells us, "and he became strong in spirit."

All children are "children on the shore". All children live and play close to the boundary between what *seems* and what *is* and move to and fro across it. However, with some hesitation and caution, I suggest that there are some children for whom that boundary is exceptionally porous and permeable, children who are as much at home *there* as they are *here*, children whose prophetic mission it is to bring us news of the beyond. (Among then perhaps are the "loners" the child psychiatrist Sula Wolff, who died recently, wrote about.)

The infant John the Baptist is not the only child to whom we can say, "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways."

Now, if we may, let's pause again and, on our own or with a neighbour, reflect on some of these things. I'm suggesting that we do well to recall some of the insights of this minor poet, Walter de la Mare. I've mentioned three such insights, that wondering is essential to our humanity; that we need to notice, as children do; and that a child too may be a prophet. So here are de la Mare's lines again:

"When I lie where shades of darkness
Shall no more assail mine eyes,
Nor the rain make lamentation
When the wind sighs,
How will fare the world whose wonder
Was the very proof of me?"

PART 3

Now to my second poet-laureate of Godly Play. Jesus of Nazareth. The earliest extended account we have of Jesus is Mark's gospel. Notice where Mark's story starts. It starts with the child on the shore. Jesus, child of God, "his spirit yet streaming from the waters of baptism", was – we read - "passing along by the sea of Galilee". That's where Mark begins, with "the child on the shore".

What's on his mind, this child of God, as he wanders by the sea, the sea, so mysterious, so menacing, so marvelous? We can only wonder. We can only wonder. What we are told is that he sees some fishermen and that he stops to talk to them. He talks to them the way children do – or at least as children used to do before they were trained to be wary of grown-ups. He does not wait to be introduced. He does not exchange inane pleasantries. He comes straight to the point, as children do.

It occurs to him that it's time for a game. The game, none more serious, is "Follow my leader". "Follow me," he says to the fishermen. The point about this game, "Follow my leader", is that you must copy exactly what your leader does – however preposterous or absurd are the things your leader gets up to. What your leader does, you must do. "I have set you an example," says Jesus, "that you should do as I have done for you." You do what your leader does. Getting crucified, for example.

According to Mark, that's where the story starts, with this child on the shore. And where the story starts is where the story ends. (rp) There is a fearful symmetry in the four gospels. We come full circle. If Mark is the first of the gospels, John is the last. You remember the final chapter of John. "Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples *by the sea of Galilee*." So the story ends where it began, with the child of God on the shore. It ends, as it began, with the fishermen being approached by one they do not know.

"Jesus stood on the beach," we read. But they do not recognise him. They wonder – they wonder - who this stranger is, just as they did at the start. They wonder all the more when he tells them where to find the fish they'd searched for in vain all night. They haul their net ashore, "full of large fish, a hundred and fifty three of them". Then there follows the feast. "Come and have breakfast," he says. So they have breakfast. They have breakfast, where breakfast always tastes best, on the beach. (And, in passing, we recall that this is just what Lucy and Edmund do, in the Narnia stories, on the shore of the Silver Sea. "Come and have breakfast", said the Lamb. "Please Lamb," said Lucy, "is *this* the way to Aslan's country?" "Not for you," said the Lamb. "For you the door into Aslan's country is from your own world.")

So the disciples have breakfast on the beach. Then, as John tells the story, at the very end – though it is not really the end, but only the beginning - Jesus turns to Peter. Peter squirms. He tries to divert Jesus's attention to someone else, the way we all do. But Jesus is not to be diverted. Jesus speaks his last word to Peter. And his last word to Peter is the same as his first word to Peter. "Follow me."

"Follow my leader". As at the beginning, so now at the close, Peter is invited to play the godliest of games. So it is for each of us, every new day until it's time to put our toys away, the child on the shore sets off and, as best we can, we stumble after.

> I danced for the fisherman James and John
> They came with me, so the dance went on.

Jesus, child of God, child on the shore, invites four fishermen to play "follow-my-leader". So the story begins. So the story ends. So it continues.

I invite you then to dwell on this image of Jesus, the eternal child of God, playing on the shore. Jesus is the child who does not retreat inland. On the shore is where he meets us, at the boundary between what seems and what is, between the transient and the transcendent, between the fleeting and the forever.

The truth about the child, at least about the child whose childhood has not yet been extinguished, is the truth about Jesus. Jesus, being the child of God he ever is, is as much at home *there* as he is *here*, as much as home *here* as he is *there*. For Jesus of Nazareth, as for my grandchildren, that apparent boundary, the boundary between what appears so real and what is "really real" - as a child might put it - is no boundary at all.

In the traditional language of Christian scripture and Christian doctrine, Jesus is at once both Son of God and Son of Man. His divinity is human and his humanity is divine.

A heretical thought in passing. (It's nice to be old enough to be heretical without being hounded by your bishop.). These days we try to make the language of scripture and faith less male. Dare we ask - has not the time come to replace the hallowed title "Son of God" with the title "child of God"? The title "Son of God" is relational. It expresses the relationship of the first and second persons of the Holy Trinity. The title "child of God" could do that job just as well. And that title could do much more. The resonances of the word "child" are such that to speak of Jesus as "the child of God" is to convey more about Jesus than his relationship to - and within - the divine. It is to suggest that childhood too belongs to the divine nature. As of course Jesus taught us it does. We really must weigh his astonishing words. "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." And he adds, "Whoever receives me receives him who sent me."

Two final thoughts. We think of Godly Play as an approach to Christian education – a better method than most on the market for nurturing children in the Christian faith. So it is. But in my judgement it is much more than that. What draws me to Godly Play is the depth and strength of its theological roots. Jerome Berryman is an accomplished Montessori educator, but he is also a theologian. That is why, a month ago, the General Theological Seminary in New York conferred on Jerome the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity. That award coincided with the publication Jerome's book, "Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace". The book is the culmination and fruition of a lifetimes's reflection. Jerome's bold conclusion is that we should see children in sacramental terms. They are, for us all, a means of grace.

Everything that is done in a Godly Play classroom – if it's being done properly – is shaped and fed by its theological roots. Disconnect what you do from those deep roots and all you're left with is a technique and some pretty playthings.

And lastly, lastly. At the end of the Godly Play lesson on the parable of the Good Shepherd, everyone and everything are put back into a beautiful box. The shepherd, the sheep, the dangerous place, the sheepfold, the grass – they all go back into their gold parable box and the box goes back to its place on its parable shelf. But I'm afraid we can no longer put Godly Play back in its box on the shelf. What is in that box, now it has been let out, cannot be put back. We can't put Godly Play back in its box and we mustn't try

The underlying principles of Godly Play – the primacy of the story; the importance – paradoxically – in telling the story of the non-verbal ("how silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given"); the wondering that constitutes our humanity, my right to make *my* response to the story, to come to *my* conclusions about it, not yours; above all the joyful assurance that all must end in a party – all these are primal Christian truths. They are, in that sense, Catholic truths, universal truths, entrusted to the Christian community everywhere and always. No doubt the custodians of Godly Play must make sure its name is not misappropriated or misapplied, but those primal truths of Godly Play cannot claim a copyright.

I'm afraid that we can't put Godly Play back in its box on the shelf.

No, I'm not afraid, I'm delighted!

John Pridmore

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