

A PARENT'S-EYE VIEW

By JOANNE ADAMS

I BEGAN TO PRAY ALOUD WITH MY ELDEST SON, Tom, when he was about eighteen months old. This was very informal, really just a part of the bath and bedtime ritual, and all I was doing was going through the day with him and giving thanks for the nicer moments. We had been at this for two or three days when Tom interrupted me mid-sentence. 'Thank you Lord for . . .', I began; 'Biscuits,' he intoned very solemnly. Actually it sounded more like 'bidditz' at that time, but he knew and I knew and I am sure the Lord knew exactly what he was referring to. Tom had grasped the concept of thanksgiving, and in his first attempt at spontaneous prayer had brought into that prayer something which was very significant in his life at that point. His spiritual journey had passed a certain milestone.

Just where this journey begins has long been a subject of debate. In what state, spiritually speaking, do our children arrive in the world? Are they small blank canvases, waiting for experience to imprint on them, or rather are they preprogrammed, already equipped for their spiritual journey before any outside influence has a chance to act? When I was pregnant for the first time and keen on getting at least the theory of parenting right, I read one book which described the infant in its early months as one big question mark; it does not know what it wants and yet it has needs; it is most certainly not a blank. This I found helpful in a very pragmatic way: my baby was not screaming orders at me but rather expressing discomfort and bewilderment and asking me to find out what was wrong and fix it. This practical advice also has a spiritual perspective, for our children are asking questions about the world and their place in it from the moment they are born.

These questions begin very simply and may not even be voiced for a long time. Observe a three-month-old baby as she discovers her hands for the first time, and note the wonder and concentration which accompanies that discovery. 'What have I found here?' 'It's moving, no, I'm moving it!' 'Look, I've got another one here, this is fantastic!' And so it continues with every new object and experience encountered; the small child's stance is one of wonder and curiosity. This, surely, is something we could be seeking to emulate, or at least to appreciate as a gift which children are unique in possessing. For all of us who are concerned with passing on faith it can come as a considerable relief to

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realize that the traffic need not be all one way. Children do come ready equipped for their spiritual journey: they have awareness and openness. As parents, then, perhaps our primary task should be to foster those two qualities which all too often get pushed aside as the child grows older. With our focus on this, we are less likely to worry about what our children 'ought' to be like, and we could become for them signposts or companions along the way rather than judges at the finishing line.

Awareness and openness

Fostering openness is something I try to keep always before me. My boys are now five and two-and-a-half and I am constantly besieged by questions from both of them. I want to give good answers, considered and truthful answers, but it is much easier to supply the answer about what happens to rubbish after it is collected, or why we have to wear seat-belts, than it is to provide a description of heaven or the reason God created sharks. This last matter arose after a particularly grisly wildlife documentary and my argument cannot have been very convincing. Tom's conclusion was that it was a 'bit silly of him really, wasn't it?'

Perhaps he is right, and yet I feel the pressure to present a rational and reasonable universe to him, a scientific mind-set which almost blots out the concept of mystery. This is an essential component of any religious world-view, but whereas I have had to undergo a process of reacquainting myself with the concept of mystery, becoming accepting of the fact that it is all right *not* to know, my children have not yet lost their familiarity with mystery. If the only answer I can offer after thorough consideration is a thoughtful 'I really don't know', that leaves the path open for them to look for their own answers and, more importantly, to see that it is acceptable not to have ready answers. Such answers, after all, will not take them far. My children are still very small and we have not yet had to consider the problem of evil, or death, or any of the 'big' questions. If they have always been given answers with all the certainty and mechanical eagerness of a speak-your-weight machine then I fear one of two things will happen when they are faced with matters such as these. Either confusion will set in immediately the first time no answer is forthcoming, or, if a ready formula is still on offer, disillusion will begin to nag later as they realize that that formula is not sufficient. Such disillusionment and confusion are part of growing up, of realizing that our parents do not have answers for everything, and it is an important step. The greater worry is that if children are brought up with the expectation of a scientific explanation for every

phenomenon and learn to view the world only in this way, then they will rapidly discount any reasoning based on faith. In a recent article for the *Tablet*, David Hay states that:

religious ways of interpreting reality are rooted in alternative ways of seeing. In the process of seeing reality through the eyes of a religious culture, we open up for inspection profound realms of human experience which secular ways of seeing lock away.¹

The job my husband and I have before us as parents is to encourage that other 'way of seeing' in our children. They are immersed in the same reality as everyone else, and I would not wish to narrow their experience or make it different from that of their secular contemporaries. How they reflect on their experience, however, will differ if seen through the eyes of faith. If children come ready equipped with awareness and openness to face experience, interpreting it still requires some help along the way.

Another way of seeing

When I observe my own children and their contemporaries I can see that they are not yet aware of the process of putting an interpretation on what they experience. Everything is much more immediate at this stage; Nicholas, my younger son, can pass from joy to misery to fury in the time it takes to spell 'interpretation', such is the mercurial temperament of the two-year-old. At this stage it is my interpretation of his experience which he is watching and which he will take on. Thus, if I rush to his side looking horrified after he has fallen, he is much more likely to wail than if I can manage a lighthearted 'Whoops-a-daisy, up we get', even if the severity of the fall is the same. The more times he hears 'Whoops-a-daisy!' the more likely he is to take that on as his normal reaction to a fall. While the experience is his, he is modelling his growing powers of interpretation on the interpretations of others. Ideally I should be trying to slip out of the picture as I see his own interpretative powers developing. Having had a long acquaintance with spiritual direction, both as a giver and receiver, I know that it is essential to keep the person focused on their own experience in their spiritual journey, for God has to be recognized there first of all. The same is true of children. At five Tom is quite capable of interpreting many of his reactions and feelings. What he needs from me when he is really happy, or has been hurt or frightened, is not a summary of how I know he must be feeling; nor should I simply leave him to work it out on his own. An invitation to explore his feelings and find words for

them, in effect to 'hear into speech'² his experience, may help him to develop the abilities to interpret ever more complex situations as he grows up, and leave open the door to that other way of seeing.

Religious practices

As my children grow and develop in understanding I am acutely aware of my own attitudes and world-view and how they are communicated to them. I have also gained a perspective on the religious practices which are part of my life, and which, by example, I am asking them to imitate. Keeping communication open seems to be as vital here as it is in the more informal realm of processing experience. When I was growing up I would have found it utterly embarrassing to discuss with my parents what God meant for me or what part religious experience played in my life. The questions simply would not have occurred to me: it was not natural in my family to discuss such matters, although morality and ethical issues were openly discussed. Awkwardness and embarrassment seem to figure very largely as obstacles in the way of spiritual development, obstacles which can slow up such development, drive it underground, or indeed stop it altogether. Children are very quick to spot this embarrassment and, sensing it in a parent or teacher, seem to take it on themselves almost out of sympathy. I found it very easy to pray aloud with Tom when he was very small, but increasingly more difficult as he has got older and my self-consciousness has increased. What has driven me on is a determination to keep the lines of communication open and, by the sheer force of doing, it is getting easier. It would be wholly unnatural not to be able to pray with my sons when I am perfectly happy to pray in the company of people I have never personally met.

Religious practice is something which can be shared out between home, school and the church community. When Tom started school, although we had chosen the local Catholic primary for him, I was not aware of how grateful I would be for their input. Neither my husband nor myself were dogmatic about a Catholic education, and indeed I thought our job would be one of softening the blow of orthodoxy. I could not have been more wrong. For a start it has given Tom his first concrete experience of a Christian community in action. The school's approach to passing on the faith starts with where the children are, not where they should be or could be. Prayer, worship and the work of the school all manage to feed into one another. This unity is important, for children seem as sensitive to disjointedness as they are to awkwardness. If prayer does not come into life and life into prayer, then we get

stuck, our spiritual journey cannot progress. Evelyn Underhill talks of the spiritual life being 'the source of that quality and purpose that makes my practical life worthwhile'.³ It is not something which can be compartmentalized and dealt with in isolation, and yet the temptation of doing just that is always there. If the school can provide an alternative example, then as parents we can be very grateful.

As a living Christian community the school can also worship in a way which has perhaps been lost in many families. My children are used to going to mass but we do not say grace or pray the rosary or recite many prayers formally. My own prayer tends to be very eclectic nowadays, and I do not think I would have introduced these more traditional elements independently. Because they have been introduced by the school, it provides a talking point and, more important than that, Tom loves the formality and solemnity of prayers learned by memory. Missing this out would have been to deny him some essential building blocks. I had forgotten how I too, at that age, had loved that feeling of doing things 'properly', learning things by heart, knowing I had mastered something which counted. To a child just beginning to find his way in the scheme of the universe, the certainty afforded by such a feeling of control is invaluable, for it provides a basis from which questioning and reasoning can begin. This is a necessary second step as children approach adolescence, and unfortunately it seems that there are still too many people who have remained tethered to this infant stage and have not progressed beyond it. Questioning and reasoning may seem heretical and dangerous to this group, but they are essential if faith is to mature.

Also associated with this first stage of development is the openness to strong sense impressions: touch and sight, taste and sound. My children may be quite uninterested in most of the mass, but the music usually goes down quite well, as does the actual process of the eucharistic prayer interpolated by the ringing bells. They want to know why our parish priest is wearing green this week, when last week he was in gold and before that in purple. All of these things provide opportunities to talk about the faith we share together as a family. At school the assemblies, masses and more informal liturgies which the children create use this openness and awareness. Perhaps most importantly, through them the children can begin to become aware of their awareness, which marks a significant step in spiritual maturity.

In her book *Born contemplative*,⁴ Madeleine Simon asserts that faith is communicated by faith, and that growth comes through identification with a caring adult. It is 'caught not taught', as the adage runs. What

clouds the development of an alternative way of seeing is seldom an outright hostility toward religious belief. It is much more likely to be the prevailing attitude which regards faith as a quaint, naïve, and therefore rather inadequate response to the real world, as though the two had little in common. In this view, religious faith is useful in that it has things to say about morality, especially sexual morality, but it can then be put on one side. In short, for practical purposes, it is something you grow out of. A friend of mine, a committed Anglican, was describing her bewilderment at the number of parents who dutifully drop their children off each Sunday morning to attend Junior Club at the local parish church. They then drive off, returning an hour or so later for the pick-up, much as they do with Brownies or swimming or football. Her puzzlement centred not so much on the fact that the parents themselves were not at church, for, after all, non-churchgoers are in the majority; it was rather that they saw Sunday school as desirable for their children. One can only speculate on the reasons for this. I would suspect that the sort of faith in question here is associated in the parents' minds with certainty, security, and with a strong element of cosiness and nostalgia. Faith limited in scope like this cannot possibly survive the rigours of the real world, and so parents simply accept that faith too, like Brownies and swimming lessons and football practice, gets left behind, though often rather to their regret. The link between what we regard as 'spiritual' and what pertains to 'real life' has been severed for many adults, meaning that the faith they have to pass on can only be fossilized and inert. It has not matched up to what they experience as the struggle of their own lives and so they cannot, with integrity, hold it out as a real help to their children in theirs.

Is the Church helping?

As a parent of small children, I have had to confront various elements in my own personality which influence both how I see the developing spirituality of my children and the efforts I make to draw it out. I have relied on the valuable contribution of family and friends and I have learned to appreciate the school's input. The final piece in the puzzle is the contribution of the local parish community. What is it doing? What should it be doing? What could it be doing in an ideal world?

What it is doing, from common experience, is not very much. I have yet to meet a parent of any denomination for whom the weekly service is not an absolute trial, leaving the parents stressed, the children fractious and their community disgruntled. Usually the disgruntlement

has one of two sources: either nothing is done for the children, in which case they become completely ungovernable, stretched out over the pews, constructing towers with the hymn books, demanding in very loud voices when it will at last be time for juice and biscuits, and scrapping with their siblings to fill the vacuum. Or 'too much' is being done for the children, so that the only people in attendance at the children's service are other children and their harassed parents, the rest of the church community having decamped to another time-slot. What should be an ideal opportunity for families to share their faith together and for the children to experience in broader form what it means to be a Christian community becomes mere theory. In reality, worship seems to foster boredom in children and resentment in their parents; in our family it has often been the low point of the week.

It seems to be the case within many church communities still that an old-fashioned notion regarding children and spiritual experience holds sway. This view, which was widespread in religious education, stems from the work of Ronald Goldman,⁵ the English psychologist of religion. His research concluded that because children need to have progressed through certain stages of cognitive development before they can, for example, give logical answers to questions arising from a bible story, they are not 'ready' for religion before a certain age. To return to David Hay's *Tablet* article, he points out that religious knowing is completely different from knowing about religion, and yet much of the well-intentioned efforts of parish communities are focused on giving children knowledge about religion, whilst disregarding the child's direct experience and innate gift of knowing.

Even where there is a progressive and stimulating programme for the children in operation such as the 'Welcoming the Word'⁶ scheme used in our parish, there can still be problems. Perhaps it is because I feel more vulnerable as the parent of small and often noisy children that I feel this more keenly, but churches can seem to radiate a disapproving air. The basic attitude seems to run thus:

God loves you but he expects certain standards of behaviour. He likes quiet, and he likes order. We adults have learned this and we like things quiet and orderly too. We know a good deal about what God likes and does not like because we are older, so you must learn from us. Until you have gained this knowledge it is best if you can just learn to sit and be quiet.

If this is the attitude, even if it is underlying and perhaps quite unconscious, then churches can never be truly welcoming places, for

children or for adults. I cannot answer the question about the place of children within the worship of the Christian community, but after a particularly stressful session with my own children I look to the words of John Donne for comfort:

Our first step is the sociableness, the communicableness of God; he loves holy meetings, he loves the communion of saints, the household of the faithful . . . Religion is not a melancholy: the Spirit of God is not a damp: the Church is not a grave: it is a fold, it is an ark, it is a net, it is a city, it is a kingdom, not only a house but a house that hath many mansions in it.⁷

Who better than our children to liven up our worship and make our churches less grave-like?

Two integral characteristics of parenthood are worry and inescapable responsibility. There is a very great deal to worry about: education, job opportunities, violence, homelessness, drugs, the environment . . . the list goes on. We may safely steer our children through childhood only to find that our fears for their well-being increase in number rather than diminish as they get older. Those of us for whom religious belief is important would add to that list whether or not our children have taken faith into their lives. We feel responsible: their attitudes become a measure of how well we have passed our faith on.

But here we must pause. We are privileged to be the first teachers of our children in faith, but God has not burdened us with overall responsibility. If we take this on we are excluding the role grace has to play. Faith is not a parcel liable to be damaged if it is not passed on properly. It does not suffer wear and tear with successive generations. With each child born the gifts of openness, awareness and the capacity for wonder are renewed. If we, as parents, can encourage these gifts, assisting our children in building up trust in their own experience, and above all, if we can manage not to get too much in the way of their developing relationship with their Creator, then we can let go of the burden of worry. Grace is what enables our relationship with God in the first instance, and it is grace that draws us on: our children are born to stand on holy ground.

NOTES

¹ David Hay, 'Children and God' in *The Tablet* (7 October 1995), pp 1270–1271.

² I have often encountered this phrase in spiritual direction circles but I have not been able to discover its origins.

³ Evelyn Underhill, *The spiritual life* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993), p 21.

⁴ Madeleine Simon, *Born contemplative* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1993), pp 60–61.

⁵ For a concise summary of Goldman's research see the *Tablet* article mentioned in note 1 above.

⁶ Joan Brown SND, *Welcoming the Word* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989).

⁷ John Donne, *Eighty sermons*.