

Improvisation and Enacting theology in All Age Preaching

Some thoughts and reflections by Ally Barrett

Introduction

What is the difference between preaching for adults and preaching for all age congregations? The traditional format for a sermon expects a group of adults to be able to listen to, engage with, and get something out of, 15 minutes of one-sided talking; most people would assume that an all age congregation (and children in particular) cannot reasonably be expected to do the same. But if all age preaching is to be other than 15 minutes of one-sided talking, then one must ask *how* it might be different.

Not just talking

First, all age preaching does not consist only of talking. Pictures are the easiest non-verbal resource to draw on. Images should add something to what is said: we have probably all seen bad powerpoint presentation in which either the presenter or the powerpoint is obsolete. When you use a visual image, consider what it adds to your words – what can the picture do that your words alone cannot? Images with visual and emotional impact will be

immediately attractive and engaging, and images that are not merely figurative will leave more room for wondering and reflection. In the TV programme 'Catchphrase'¹ contestants are asked to 'Say what you see'; even when there is an intended one-to-one correspondence between the image or animation and the catchphrase in question, the variety of 'wrong' answers suggested is astounding. How much more, then, can a visual image in preaching function like an open question, to which there is not one single right answer, but rather an opportunity to engage with the artwork as a way of doing theology. Using several contrasting artistic interpretations of the same bible story can be a good way of introducing the idea to a congregation that the artist has interpreted the story, rather than merely illustrated it – the answer to the very helpful question, 'Say what you see' may well be different for each of the artworks you show. Think, too, about how you might present visual images to the congregation. A big screen is wonderful in many ways, but there is also something to be said for people to be able to point out things to the person sitting next to them if they are looking at smaller copies that have been distributed.

Think, too, about the other senses. How can smell, taste, and touch also be means by which people can engage with the gospel?

My church uses the Blanket of Blessing – an extremely soft, fleece blanket – during reflections on the love or comforting presence of God. Members of the congregation are invited to wrap themselves (or each other) in the blanket for a time while others ask for God's blessing on them (either silently or aloud), and then pass it on.

Questions for discussion or reflection

How have you used visual images in your all age preaching?

What sorts of image did you use?

How did the images function as open questions, and how did it go?

How have you used the other senses?

¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catchphrase_\(UK_game_show\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catchphrase_(UK_game_show))

Not just one-way

Conversational preaching (in which the talking is not all one-way) for an all age congregation can be a very fruitful approach.

One of my least favourite all age preaching tactics is ‘Guess what’s in my head’ – the starting assumption that there is a right answer, which I know, and you might be able to guess if I keep asking you questions until you get there.’

The worst published example of this I have ever seen was a talk entitled ‘The meaning of Christmas’. The preacher was required to ask a series of twenty-one trivia questions on the theme of Christmas, each involving some aspect of the secular celebration, and then write the answers to each horizontally in a giant pre-made grid. Once all questions had been answered correctly, it was then possible to read vertically downwards the phrase ‘Glory to the new born king’. Last time I checked the meaning of Christmas is something to do with heaven touching earth² not a large number of trivia questions and absolutely no theological content whatsoever, even if they can be made to spell out a catchy phrase.

This ‘Guess what’s in my head’ type of quiz-question approach is not truly conversational, because real conversation is between equals, and it cannot truly take place if one person holds all the cards.

If we are to engage in theological conversation during preaching, then we must be willing to ask questions to which we do not know the answer, or to which there is more than one answer, and to which there is no answer. Genuinely open questions give opportunities for members of the congregation to make genuine contributions, and all age congregations are just as able to do this as all-adult congregations, if not more so, because they have a greater breadth of experience and attitude to draw on, and from which all can benefit.

² The additional collect for Christmas Day (Common Worship) begins, “Lord Jesus Christ, your birth at Bethlehem draws us to kneel in wonder at heaven touching earth...”

The other day I was leading an act of collective worship at school (which, due to various extenuating circumstances, I had failed to plan) about the Transfiguration, and simply asked the question, ‘what is it like to get a glimpse of heaven?’ One child spoke of walking through a forest and seeing dappled sunlight making the leaves glow, and then the wind parting the canopy to allow blinding sunlight through the cracks. Another spoke about hiding under a dark blanket and seeing pinpricks of light shining through the tiny holes in the fabric. Others talked about doing things that they absolutely loved doing, and the feeling of being completely alive and happy.

The first time I gave an All Age talk at Westcott House, it was the eve of St George, and by way of introduction, I asked everyone to imagine that St George had come to the service – what would he be contributing to the worship and to the community – we did this by drawing a picture of him as we talked about his experiences and characteristics. The picture even included the tail-end of a dragon. Finally we needed add a facial expression – so we needed to work out what he was feeling. One of the children, brilliantly, said that he was feeling, “worried and overconfident” (about the fact that he was facing a dragon). In that moment, she succinctly summed up a theological college in the spring! I had come with my own ideas about St George, and why a theological college might choose to celebrate him, but through asking an open question, we were all able to benefit from a much better answer.

Questions for discussion or reflection

In what circumstances are you most often confronted with open questions? How does it feel when there isn’t one single pre-determined right answer to find?

How does conversational preaching enable everyone to participate fully? Who might not find that they are able to participate?

What sorts of open questions work best in preaching? Abstract questions about God, concrete questions about the story, ‘life’ questions about personal experience?

The gospel in the gospel

Identifying the gospel in the gospel - that is, the central nugget of what you believe God would like to say to the congregation - requires a feat of imagination on the preacher's part. It is a product of the lectionary readings, the time/day (in the church year, and in the calendar year, often, the local and global context, and the people themselves, as well as any additional revelation directly from God through prayer and active listening – all these factors help to determine what will be the one thing you hope to share with the congregation during the talk. This makes it hard to plan too far in advance! It's also possible that during a talk the congregation themselves will identify the gospel in the gospel, just as they did for the St George service described above.

Picking one focus from a reading is hard if we're used to bible studies that take apart a reading verse by verse. All age services often involve dramatizing or simplifying readings – this is an act of interpretation, for it involves making decisions about which themes to bring out, and which details are essential to the story. Godly Play often involves asking the question, 'What could we leave out and still have all the story that we need?'³ As you sit with the text and reflect on it, which words or phrases or ideas start to float to the surface? Which seem central and which seem peripheral? How does the text resonate with the rest of the liturgy, with other parts of scripture that may be known to your congregation, with life experience of individuals or your church community or the world?

What happens when you try to imagine yourself into the story? Closing your eyes may help you to visualise the scene, and you may find that miming some of the actions may help you to get closer to the text. Can you smell, taste and feel what the people in the story are experiencing? Can you empathise with their fear, excitement, sadness, joy? Engaging through your senses and emotions may help you to identify the gospel, in the gospel.

Many years ago we used the story of Jesus asleep on the cushion in the boat while the storm raged. I identified the gospel in the gospel as the astonishing ability of Jesus to rest and be at peace in the midst of the storm, and asked (in advance) a member of the congregation to make me a load of tiny squashy cushions,

which she was glad to do. We held these during the service, and reflected on those things that make us feel threatened, and those things that enable us to hold onto a feeling of safety and security, despite everything. At the end of the service there were some spare cushions, and I invited people to take one to pass on to someone who they felt needed to share what we'd shared in church. I thought nothing more of it, but two years later I was called to the bedside of a member of the congregation who had just died after a long battle with cancer. As I sat by her body waiting for the undertaker to arrive, I saw that in one hand she had a holding cross, and in the other she held her small cushion.

Questions for discussion and reflection

How do you start to look at the reading as part of your preparation?

How do you decide which reading(s) to use in the act of worship?

How do you choose how to present scripture for all ages?

How do you go about identifying the gospel in the gospel?

When have you experienced finding the gospel in the gospel and seeing it bear fruit beyond the service, and beyond what you had dared hope?

Everyone matters, everyone contributes

Can young children contribute theological and spiritual insights? What happens when you ask big questions of small people? What happens when small people ask big questions of you?

Asking open questions is a matter of trust. Interaction and conversation in preaching is a public loss of control, though it is worth admitting that the normal control we may think we have over how a sermon is received is an illusion! Do you trust your congregation? Do you trust the children in your congregation?

³ <http://www.godlyplay.org.uk/method/>

God can and does speak through anyone and everyone, including children. Here are some examples of theological thought collected from a 5/6 year old, clearly able to think outside the box.⁴

"It's important that we call God 'Our Father' not 'My Father' because we are all God's children together."

In the circuit of love God is the battery, Jesus is the fuse (because the love of God comes through Jesus) and the people are the light bulbs."

"I think God is sort of outside time so that he can see the whole world and everything, he could even see it backwards if he wanted to."

"When I ask God things I wish he would just tell me the answer, but maybe he wants me to work some things out for myself."



Did God actually save the queen? Maybe the Queen was standing at the edge of a big cliff, and she was about to fall off the cliff, and God could reach out his hand and hold her hand so she didn't fall off the cliff. That would be saving the Queen. But God doesn't have a body, so he doesn't have a hand, so that wouldn't work. Maybe God would have to ask someone who did have a hand to go and hold the Queen's hand. But what if that person wasn't listening?

"Heaven isn't up in space, it's everywhere, but differently real. It's full of people and hugs and love, but mostly love."

⁴ <http://wisdomofdaniel.wordpress.com>

Do we sometimes make questions too easy? Too trivial? Can we avoid jargon and language that excludes the less literate or erudite, while still raising our expectations of what children (and indeed adults) can think and feel?

Even in schools, the new national curriculum is all based on open questions, aiming to encourage children to think for themselves rather than just be told the answer. Children are capable of abstract thought, and deep questions; what better context for exploring them could there be than one that enables the hard stuff to be enfolded in prayer, and in which it's alright to ask questions back?⁵

Embracing the risk

Preaching that is genuinely interactive and participatory is risky. But it brings its own rewards. Ask yourself, if the risk seems too high, is it because we do not trust our congregation, or because we do not trust God, or because we do not trust ourselves to be able to work with what may happen? We know that God can and does speak and act through people of all ages. But how willing are we to trust that he will do so in *our* all age talk? And that we will be attuned enough to it to be able to notice it when it happens and make the most of it?

I used to value control much more than I do now. I used to plan things a long time in advance. I used to preach reading from a script. But then I got married to a man who showed me how to sing jazz, I got ordained, and I had children. Being in control became a distant memory, and I found I had to embrace its lack.

All Age Preaching and Jazz

Jazz is conversational. Central to the experience of playing and singing jazz is the interplay, the give and take between the musicians. In jazz, there is no such thing as being a passive participant, all listening is active, because you will want to pick up and run with what others have played, or provide a

⁵ For much more on this, see Rebecca Nye's wonderful book, 'Children's Spirituality' (Church House Publishing, 2009)

counterpoint to it, a musical comment on it, or simply appreciate it.



I recently had the absolute pleasure of hearing and seeing the Jazz at Lincoln Center orchestra with Wynton Marsalis⁶ and aside from the phenomenal musical experience I enjoyed, I was struck by the social and conversational nature of the performance evident in every member of the band, all the time.

In jazz, the solos are shared out, and each player has their own unique style, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

When you're singing or playing, you have to know the tune and the chords – they're what gives coherence to the performance, they're what you come back to that's familiar. If you're not comfortable with this 'heart' of the piece, then how can you improvise around it? You would be constantly afraid of losing the thread and not being able to find your way back!

Equally, if you've practiced your jazz scales and played around with different motifs and figurations (even singing them in the shower) then they'll be at your fingertips (or the vocal equivalent), you'll have a repertoire to draw on so that your improvising doesn't come from nowhere, but from your own experience and from what you've heard others play.

When you're playing with a younger or less experienced player you can pick up whatever they contribute and run with it – echoing their phrases and notes, and making them part of the bigger picture.



I have wonderful memories of my daughter when she'd just started learning the clarinet, wanting desperately to play jazz with her dad, and her dad enabling that to happen by tailoring what he played around her contributions. The delight on her face at hearing back her own two-note phrases, and hearing them take on new meaning and beauty was beyond price.

⁶ <http://www.jalc.org>

If we are scared of improvising when we preach, it may be because we are not comfortable enough with the central theology of what we're doing, we may not have quite found the gospel in the gospel and we may need to work more on that, just like becoming more familiar with a musical theme – its melody and chords.

We may also be scared that what we say 'off the cuff' will be irrelevant, or stupid, because we haven't planned it and written it down. But if we're always turning words and phrases and actions over in our minds (like singing in the shower) and having informal conversations with others about God, about humanity, about the wonder of life, then we may well find that the things that pop into our heads on the spur of the moment are in fact not coming from nowhere, but from the rich bank of theological and spiritual 'stuff' that we've been piling up for years. Your talk may have only been planned last night, but you've been preparing for it all your life.

Thinking about where your particular all age talk fits in with the liturgy, with the season, with the state the church is in, with the stuff that's going on in the community or in the nation means that the ideas that are relevant to those things are more likely to be at the top of the pile of stuff we have to draw on.

And there's also divine inspiration – the things on top of all that, which God longs to say through our lips and actions, if only we'll let him speak and move through us. Some of the best all age talks I've done are the ones in which I let go and let God.

Enacting Theology for All Ages

We are all wired up differently – most people have come across the idea that there are different styles of learning, and we may also have come across the idea that these may be extended to encompass styles of worship, or praying. They are often described as follows:

- interpersonal
- intrapersonal
- visual
- verbal
- logical/mathematical
- musical/rhythmic
- kinaesthetic

I heard Leslie Francis give a talk to church school Headteachers about how we might honour difference in school communities. He drew on Genesis 1.27 'In the image of God he created them, male and female he created them', suggesting that in Hebrew writing, use of two extremes implies 'and everything between': in addition to 'male and female' we might add 'extravert and introvert', 'sensory and intuitive' etc; furthermore he asserted that this does not mean that different people are, despite their differences, still made in God's image, but rather that it is through our variety that we are, *together*, God's image.



How can our all age preaching honour the differences that make our church communities into the Body of Christ?⁷ How might the different styles of learning, praying, worshipping, and theologically reflecting find expression in our liturgy and preaching? How wonderful would it be if in preaching something of Pentecost was at work – each 'hearing in their own language'.

Questions for discussion and reflection

Do you know how you are wired up, in terms of the styles of learning described above?

Can all age preaching really encompass all of these?

Which are the hardest to include in preaching?

Which are the easiest or come most naturally to you?

Many people find that it is those towards the end of the list that are hardest to incorporate in preaching. It may be easy to include verbal and visual means of reflecting, but harder to incorporate logical/mathematical or kinaesthetic forms of theological activity.

⁷ See 1 Corinthians 12

The whole services preaches

A holistic approach to all age worship means that not everything has to be in the 'sermon slot'. When you start to plan a service, think about how the whole act of worship, from the moment people walk up to the church door until they get home again or even beyond, can help to open up the gospel in the gospel that you have identified.

How will music and song play a part? Repetition, rhyme, repeated responses and refrains, are all ways of tapping into the rhythmic/musical mode of engagement. Songs themselves can be a wonderful way of backing up the gospel in the gospel and we will all know from our own experience that we will remember what we have sung far better than what we have spoken.⁸

How might the reading itself insinuate its way into the liturgy, perhaps at the gathering, at the introduction to confession or to the creed, into the intercessions, the sharing of the peace or the dismissal? How might any objects or actions that are used during your talk become part of the prayers? What might be taken home at the end?

The 'tags' between items can become a wonderful way of letting the gospel in the gospel give shape to the liturgy. For instance, if the creed feels as if it will get in the way of the flow between the talk and the prayers, would you change the order, or find a way of introducing the creed so that it becomes part of that flow?

In my church we have an annual 'teaching Eucharist' in which there is no sermon or talk, but instead a 'reflective running commentary' running through the service with actions and thinking and conversation to help the congregation experience the Eucharist more deeply. We try and pick a different day in the church year each time, and the commentary aims to reflect this. For instance, when we picked Pentecost, the commentary focused on the role of the Holy Spirit, and when we picked the Ascension, we focused on how the Body of Christ turns from being Jesus' physical body to being the Church. In this way, we enabled the liturgy to tell a story with which we could each engage in our own way.

⁸ This may be what St Augustine was getting at when he said "Qui bene cantat bis orat" or "He who sings well prays twice". (though it probably still works if you're not that great a singer)

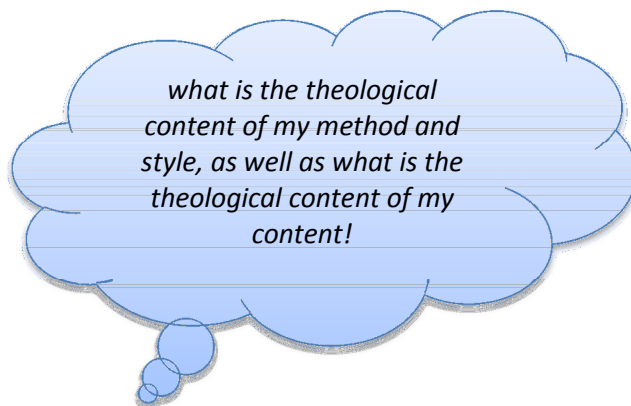
...and preaching is sacramental

If the whole service preaches, then it is only fair that the talk should be considered sacramental. Preaching is much more about process than about end result, just as a sacrament is more about action than about object: we *share* and *eat* the bread and we *pour out* and *drink* the wine, we *pour* the water at baptism and we *smear* the oil, we *give* the lighted candle.... The 'stuff' we use alongside our words in preaching must also be sacramental – not just objects in themselves but about action, process, and transformation.

Form and content

Is the theological content of your talk at one with the experience of being part of your talk? Actually, this is a question we should ask about all our acts of worship. Take the baptism liturgy as an example. It is full of words of welcome, inclusion, and belonging, but many churches would find it hard to work out what those liturgical words look like in real life, and the words themselves will lack both integrity and transformational power if they are not lived out in the life of the church community. If we *say* welcome then we must also *do* welcome.

Ask yourself this crucial question every time you preach:



Action and emotion are engaging

In Mark's gospel Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard⁹ as a direct response to the attitude and planned action of the religious leaders. In doing so, he gives them a choice about whether they are going to accept their role as the wicked tenants. They engaged emotionally in the story through their anger, and responded by wanting to silence both Jesus and his irritating stories, thus confirming their role in the story itself. Jesus was masterful at telling stories that made the hearers take part in them, and then gave them the chance to be transformed by them. Participation in the gospel story today through intellectual, emotional, and spiritual engagement, is challenging and potentially transformative.

When we actually do something we write it into our bodies as well as our minds. Many people are naturally kinaesthetic learners, and words alone cannot enable an idea to sink in, but an action can. When we do something tangible, it functions sacramentally, also enacting something spiritual and intangible.

'Doing' theology

Much theology done, rather than said,¹⁰ and language in itself fails when trying to capture what is inherently uncapturable (as anyone who has ever preached on the Trinity will know). Above I have already written up some experiences (the bits in the grey boxes) as they have seemed relevant to the point I was making at the time. In this final section I have written up some more experiences of all age preaching, aiming to show how some more of the ideas I've tried to explain looked in real life. These are not 'how to' guides or sets of instruction, but rather scripts / stories of what we did and what happened.

⁹ Mark 12.1-12

¹⁰ I think it was St Francis who said, 'Preach the gospel at all times, using words if you really have to.'

TRINITY

Beforehand I prepared a strip cut from a bed sheet, approximately 8 to 10 inches wide and the whole length of the sheet. I made it into a loop, but put in three half twists, then sewed the ends together using several independent attachment points so that when I came to cut down the length of the loop the stitching wouldn't come undone. I also brought with me scissors and a crayon.

How big is God? Isaiah wondered how to express his experience of God - when he wrote about his vision of God he said that the hem of God's robe filled the whole temple. When we look up at the roof of the church, and when we look down at the hem of our own clothes we can get just a glimpse of what Isaiah felt.



But God is bigger than that. God is bigger than we can possibly imagine. Mathematicians have a word for anything that is impossibly big: *infinity*. They even have a symbol for it - it looks like an 8 on its side. We can make it with this big loop of fabric.

Like a circle, you can trace it round and round with your finger - and it never stops, it has no ending. Even if we think of the biggest number we can, it's always possible to add one to it to make it bigger - infinity is different because we can't count to it, it's just impossibly big. God is infinite - bigger than any number could possibly be, and bigger and more awesome than we can ever really get our minds around, and we can't ever get to describing God completely, because if we think we have, we'd find that it actually wasn't God we were describing after all, but something less than God.

Now, there's something that I haven't told you about this loop of cloth. It's actually not a normal loop of cloth, and to prove it, I'd like you to work out how many sides it has. We all know that a piece of cloth has two sides, but this one's a big different. You can check by drawing a crayon line all the way along one side of the cloth.

Of course, what you find when you try it, is that when you've drawn the line and got back to where you started, you're on the wrong side of the fabric! By the time you get back to the beginning of your line, you've actually drawn on both 'sides' of the fabric - because in fact, a mobius strip is a loop with a twist in it, so it only has one 'side'! ¹¹

¹¹ You can find out more about mobius strips on the internet, if you want to try them at home eg http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%B6bius_strip

Some things are just hard to get your head round! People sometimes are worried about how hard it is to get your head round God. How can God be one God, but still Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Three and one, all at the same time! But as we've just seen, even a bit of bed sheet can have both one side and two sides at the same time, so it's not surprising that God is more awesome and mysterious and interesting than that.

Now, this big loop is actually a really special kind of mobius strip. It has not just one twist in it, but three. And a mobius strip with three twists has some special things about it. I'm going to cut along the middle of the strip, all the way round the loop. Do you think we'll end up with two loops? Let's see! Actually, what you'll see is that we end up with one loop, with a knot in it! But there's more we can do with it. I'm going to try something, and while I do, I'd like to hear from anyone in the congregation suggestions for how we might understand the Trinity - the three-in-oneness of God. We'll have all heard lots of them before in sermons! (People may suggest Shamrock (clover) leaf, Water/ice/steam, Sun/light/heat, Jaffa cakes - chocolate/sponge/jelly!)

None of these is quite right - they all reduce God to something we can understand and get hold of - none of them really gets to the heart of the mystery of the Trinity - how could they if God is infinite and our brains aren't!



And now I've finished arranging this new loop, we can see another one of these illustrations of the Trinity - a mobius strip with three half-twists actually cuts up into a perfect interwoven trefoil! Yes, this does probably deserve a round of applause(!) but to be honest, it's a clever trick and a quirk of maths. It doesn't really tell us much more about the nature of God than a shamrock leaf or a jaffa cake. We can rearrange the cloth to remind us all sorts of things about God: A tick to remind us that God is good, or a heart to remind us that God is love. We could probably think of more things (and if you ask the children to do this, they'll come up with some great stuff).



At this point in my talk I'd run out of ideas, but the children hadn't. They made the fabric back into a circle again, and then climbed into it - there was room for them all, just as there is room in God for all of us. And then a wonderful thing happened - once inside the circle, the children all started hugging each other and dancing. At this point I didn't feel there was much left to say! So I just got everyone to sing instead - we sang 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow, as a round, while the children danced and played.



THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

I brought along some cups, a large jug of water, some sheets of card, and a large waterproof mat. Also, a lidded plastic bottle with some small holes in the side towards the bottom (made by a heated skewer) and a plastic funnel.

We told the story – at least, the parts of it that seemed to contain the gospel in the gospel (these were largely the first part of the conversation, the bits about the living water and the mission to the city). We thought about how the people in the city probably thought of the woman as a bit of a leaky bucket – not much good for anything, but how Jesus saw her potential.



We then used the apparatus to explore the living water. A whole bunch of us worked together to make a marble-run style water feature, with the bottle and funnel at the top, and the sheets of card folded to make channels, lined up with the holes in the bottle, and the cups at the other end of the channels. (Actually, when we did it

we added another layer, using a further set of channels and cups, but this is not for the faint hearted.)

We poured the water. We thought about times we use water in worship, and remembered baptism. When we poured water into the bottle, it flowed out through the 'leaks', down the channels and into the glasses. We thought about what that might mean.

When we put the lid on the bottle, even though it still contained plenty of water, it stopped flowing (this is because no new air could rush in to replace the lost volume and nature abhors a vacuum, but spiritually speaking it showed us the importance of remaining open to the continual outpouring of the Spirit, not just as a one-off at baptism).

We kept pouring for a bit. We tried some different figurations. We wondered about what would happen if the bottle was even leakier. We wondered what it would take for the water to reach the people at the very back of the church. And we got so thirsty doing it all that we drank the water. And felt refreshed.

THE PRODIGAL SON

I prepared three long, beautiful ribbons, salvaged from a wedding that had taken place in church, and some scissors.

We told the story, and as we did so, three people stood in a triangle and each held the end of a ribbon in each hand, so that the ribbons formed a triangle. I explained that the story was about a family – a father, and older son, and a younger son - and that the ribbons were from a wedding, so they were full of love, just like the family. I played up how beautiful and special the ribbons were.

But as the story progressed, we got to the moment when the younger son broke away from the family, and I cut the ribbon between the father and the younger son, so that the frayed ends of the ribbon hung down, limp and broken. We paused to feel sad or angry at destroying something so beautiful.

As the story continued, we reached the point when the younger son returned, seeking not to be part of the family but a servant. Effectively, the father refuses his request: 'If you come home then you come as my son – there is no place for you here as my servant, only as my child.' The younger son had to decide what to do. He chose to mend the broken pieces and become a son again. I then tied up the frayed ends of the ribbon in a bow. The two people holding them found they had to step closer to each other as I did this, as there was less length to play with.

The story went on, and reached the point where the older son rejects his brother and his father, at which point I cut the remaining two ribbons. We paused, again, lamenting what had been destroyed.



We then asked ourselves: what do we want to happen? Jesus left the story unfinished, so that we had to finish it ourselves. The congregation, were desperate for me to tie the frayed ends together, as we had with the first one, but we stopped before we did that and wondered what it would take in real life for this to happen. Not just apologies, but forgiveness, love, humility.... When we finally did tie all the loose ends together, we noticed how the three people were standing much closer than before, and how the ribbons were even more beautiful than they had been at first.

PALM SUNDAY

One of the Palm Sunday accounts has a wonderful line when the religious leaders ask Jesus to get his followers to be quiet, and he replies: "If the crowds were silent, the very stones would shout aloud"¹²

Our church service especially for children and parents was meeting on Palm Sunday afternoon, and we took this verse as our gospel in the gospel. We had recently had some building work done in the church, so we had a whole area round the back that was full of stones of all types, shapes and sizes. We went round the back and collected loads of them, washed them and brought them in. As we did so, we talked about the Palm Sunday story, and wondered what the stones might have shouted, if they'd had the chance. We wondered whether they might have been the same stones that Jesus refused to turn to bread when he was being tempted¹³, and enjoyed the idea that the stones were so old that dinosaurs would have walked on them millions of years ago – oh, the stories they could tell if only they could talk!

We wondered what we could do with the stones we found, and because we have made quite frequent reflective use of Jonathan Clarke's iconic 'Way of life' sculpture in Ely Cathedral, we decided to reproduce it using the stones we had found. It took up most of the chancel, but there was still room to get to the altar and back. We saw our own stones as they formed part of the path, and wondered at the twists and turns in Jesus' journey and in our own.

At the end of our service we didn't have the heart to clear it up, so we left it, thinking someone would complain. They didn't. We covered it with tiny candles during the Tenebrae service on the Wednesday of Holy Week, then on Good Friday it ended up being used as a focal point for the ecumenical service, and then on Easter Sunday my seven year old son scoured the churchyard for dandelions and filled every crack and crevice with what, by the 10.30am would look like tiny sunshines.



¹² Luke 19.40

¹³ For more on this wonderful idea, see Malcolm Guite's sonnet for the third station of the cross in 'Sounding the Seasons'

EASTER EGGS

The evening of Holy Saturday I found myself slightly disturbed by the number of 'Happy Eater' and 'Alleluia' messages in my twitter feed from those returning from early Easter Vigils. Being in a church that doesn't 'do' the Easter Vigil I kept wanting to reply 'Spoiler-alert – we haven't had our resurrection yet!' It made me think again about the fact that we light our paschal candle for the first time at the 8 o'clock, and then again, for the benefit of the 10.30am congregation. I think we even roll the stone back again for the 10.30 so we can have our own resurrection moment! It struck me then, that there is some rather wonderful theology in this oddity, which is how I came to plan the following talk, for which I simply needed a handful of hollow chocolate eggs.

Jesus' tomb was a little like this egg – inside it's dark and cramped, but when the resurrection happened, and Jesus burst out of the tomb, Good Friday is smashed once and for all, and new life is set free. (At this point I dramatically smash the egg into a bowl or basket.) But the trouble was, that nobody witnessed it! The soldiers (in that account, anyway) passed out and missed it, and the next thing we know, it's the women arriving at the tomb still expecting to find a dead body, and instead finding it empty. The actual moment of the resurrection happened in private. All that resurrection joy and nobody to share it.



On Easter Sunday we focus on Mary's story (which will probably have been read as the gospel reading). There in the garden, the resurrection had already happened, but she was trapped in her own Good Friday – her grief and sadness kept her in the dark (I would hold up another, whole egg, at this point). And we can tell the exact moment when the resurrection happened for her – it's when Jesus calls her name. Suddenly grief is turned to joy. Mary's Good Friday is smashed once and for all, the new life is set free in her (at this point I would smash the second egg and handing it round) (For very small children, it can be good to act this out – making ourselves small and sad, scrunched up with our arms wrapped round us, and then jumping up for joy.)

If you want to continue the story, you'll see that all of Jesus' friends get their own moment of resurrection, and you can mention as many of them as you like, smashing another egg each time and sharing the chocolate out: For the disciples in the upper room, it's not when Jesus comes to life, it's when he walks through the locked door of their fear and breathes his peace on them. For Thomas, it's a week later, when Jesus touches away his doubt and by his wounds he gains his faith. For the disciples at Emmaus it's the moment when Jesus breaks the bread, and for Peter it's the offer (in John 21) of a threefold commitment to balance his threefold denial. None of these resurrection stories take place at the very moment of the resurrection, they are all afterwards, by varying degrees – perhaps only by minutes in Mary's case, but for the others it's hours, maybe days before the resurrection becomes real for them.

And this is still happening now. The resurrection was a historical moment, but the very fact that nobody was there to see it at the time means that each time we meet with the risen Jesus today is just as important as the times that the disciples met him. We did not miss out for the fact that we are living almost 2000 years after the event, for it is fresh every Easter, every Sunday, potentially every moment of every day. For every moment could be the moment when we will find that Christ has spoken into our grief, or walked through the locked door of our fear, or touched our doubt into faith.....

So, happy Easter! Not just today, but tomorrow, and the next day – whenever something enables you to grasp the new life that God offers us in the risen Christ.

CREATION



We were thinking about creation, and wanted a way of taking our time over it – making the story of creation a process, not an instant thing. We chose to make pom poms, partly because they are round and we could use green and blue wool(!), and partly because there is a moment in making one when you have to take the risk of cutting through the threads, tying the wool around the middle, and then removing the cardboard templates. This is the point when it could all go wrong, when all your hard work could unravel and come to nothing, when you could look at your wonderful creation and see that it wasn't how you'd hoped... We talked together about how this felt. We talked about the parts of the world that made us frustrated or sad or anxious. We held our pom poms in our hands as we prayed, and we sang, very softly, 'He's got the whole world in his hands'. We may also have read some Julian of Norwich.¹⁴

¹⁴ Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love, Third Showing

Resources list

Websites

- <http://reverendally.wordpress.com> contains some useful items for all age worship and other bits and bobs that I've written, produced or accumulated over the years.
- <http://flamecreativekids.blogspot.co.uk/> is a searchable blog containing a wealth of craft activity suggestions, many of which can be adapted for use in all age worship.
- <http://www.spiritualchild.co.uk/> provides resources, articles and ideas about children's spirituality and discipleship, celebrating children's spirituality, their insights, experiences, gifts and questions.

Books of ideas

I've never found it possible to use someone else's ideas off the peg, but the following can sometimes give good starting points. There are others, but these are the ones I have used.

- Sandra Millar – Worship together
- Claire Benton Evans – All Sorts Worship
- Susan Sayers – Living Stones series
- Roots worship is also a subscription magazine containing lectionary based resources for all age worship (it runs alongside the Roots material for children's groups).
- Sue Wallace – Multi-sensory prayer
- Wendy Raymer & Annie Slade – Multi-sensory seasons

Other resources

The Mothers Union publishes leaflets on a range of subjects including one on Children & Spirituality, which is an excellent starting point that could be distributed to a whole congregation that is new to the idea of children being in worship.