

# The Sacrament That Won't Sit Still

*Guest Lecture by Rev'd Canon Dr Andrew Sheldon,  
presented at the National Godly Play Conference in Australia,  
Expo Day, July 16, 2011*



*In Godly Play training we spend much time on the method – the telling of the story, the handling of the materials, the placement of things in the room, and the ordering of the roles of the adults in the room. This is important work because the Godly Play method is the container through which the meaning, values, and principles of Godly Play are conveyed to the participants. But I fear that an over-focus on the method may mean that the meaning, values, and principles will get lost. Notwithstanding that people can act their way into right thinking, and notwithstanding that adherence to the Godly Play method over a long period of time can instil, like osmosis, the deeper meaning behind the method, I do think it important that we regularly step back and remind ourselves of the core values of*

*Godly Play. These values are rooted in a deep respect for, and honouring of, the child. And so I offer these thoughts from that perspective.*

In my Anglican tradition generations of children knew what a sacrament was. In one of the first questions of the Catechism found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, which they would memorise in preparation for Confirmation, the Bishop would ask them: "What is a sacrament?" They would answer: "A Sacrament is an outward visible sign of an inner invisible grace". And I suspect it never occurred to a single Bishop that the ones uttering those words may be the very manifestation of what it was that they were saying. That the visible means of grace was standing right before the Bishop. That the visible means of grace was the child.

In Jerome Berryman's latest book, *Children and the Theologians*, he proposes that children be considered as sacraments; that one aspect of a formal doctrine of children is the notion that children are formally means of grace. Berryman then goes to show how children are present, or could be present, in the traditional seven sacraments of the church.

I would like to take this concept – children as formal means of grace – on the one hand, and some of the precepts of classical sacramental theology on the other hand, and explore what this proposal might look like. As a qualifier I must say that I am not asking you to accept that the Church has seven sacraments, or two sacraments, or sacraments at all. I am not asking you to accept any of the precepts of sacramental theology as they pertain to the existing sacraments that you may or may not recognise. I am asking that in the spirit of Godly Play-fulness you play along with me as we work with sacramental theology to explore Berryman's concept of children as sacraments.

Are children, in and of themselves, signs of God's grace? And if so, how and why?

Let's unpack sacramental theology and apply it to children.

### 1. Sacraments are efficacious.

Sacraments do not need to 'function' in order to realise their purpose. The bread and wine 'are'. They 'are' in spite of the motivation, the nature, the state, the relative 'goodness', of the receiver. Classical sacramental theology names that the 'receiver' of the sacraments is fundamentally not a 'player'. This is especially the case when we consider infant baptism – the infant is decidedly not a 'player'! Although it is true, and I will later note this, that a sacrament does need to be received in order to effect that which it represents, the reception is not the act by which the bread, wine, water and other elements are made sacramental.

Children, therefore, do not need to 'function' in any way to be a sign of God's grace. Indeed they do not need to be pandered to, or pointed out, or put forward, in order to be a sign and symbol of God's grace. ***Their very presence in the midst of the community is to put the community in proximity to their sacramental nature which is not affected in any way by how they function in the community.***

### 2. Sacraments are icons/conduits to God.

Sacraments are signs and symbols, and in a profound sense, servants of the greater mission which is God's mission. I am an Anglican Priest. It is my understanding therefore that I serve iconically – that is that 'through' my actions and words the people see and hear and experience God's grace. In my church, behind the altar, hangs a lovely curtain of red, and yellow, and orange. Last month on the Sunday we celebrated Pentecost, I wore a red chasuble as I presided at the Eucharist. After the celebration

many congregants mentioned to me that as I was presiding at the altar I disappeared. As it should be!

Priests and other ministers of sacraments are not so much acting, not so much even reflecting, as they are refracting or redirecting the perspective of the people towards God and God's work in the world, and particularly when they do preside, God's work in the sacrament.

Children as sacraments are therefore by their nature a conduit to God's grace. There is something about the child that 'points' to the very nature of God; God who loved children so much that God became one. And could it be that in the Incarnation God was not so much bending to human nature but was bending towards the nature of God? By showing that what God fundamentally is, is childlike; that the fullest representation of 'God with us' is the child; "Unless one becomes as a child you cannot enter the kingdom of God." ***Could it be that in the Incarnation God was not submitting God's self to the inevitability of childhood as a precursor to the real essence of humanity which is adulthood? Could it be instead that in the Incarnation God was choosing and naming childhood as the essence of what it is to be both human and divine?*** As such the child is not only, or just, one more recipient of God's grace, but is in service of God's grace in a way that adults cannot, and never will be; "Let the little children come unto me for of such is the kingdom of God".

### **3. Sacraments 'work' when they are received.**

Notwithstanding that the bread and wine are signs of God's grace detached from the motivation/state/nature of the recipient, it is also the case that for sacraments to actually 'effect' that which they represent they must, by definition, be received.

***As such, for the Christian community to experience/know children as sacraments they must be prepared to receive them; receive them in the same way they receive baptism, Eucharist etc.*** That is, the Christian community must formalise the reception of the child in the same way they do the other sacraments.

Initially there must be teaching and consensus that the child is a means of grace. There must be practices that regularly expose the larger community to the child. There must be opportunity for the larger community to dialogue with the child. In other words there will need to be the same institutional commitment to emphasising the centrality of the child in the Christian community as there is in emphasising the centrality of the other sacraments. Indeed there will need to be the same institutional buy-in vis-à-vis resources, budgets, and priorities, that there is around the other acknowledged sacraments. For instance any judicatory that will not hesitate to fully equip a sacristy with the vessels and vestments necessary to celebrate the Eucharist and baptism, should not hesitate to fully equip a Godly Play space with the high quality materials that characterise such a room.



#### **4. Sacraments involve ritual actions.**

When the various sacraments are celebrated they are always accompanied by ritual actions. At Holy Communion the presider – in imitating Jesus' own actions – will take, give thanks, break, and give the elements. At baptism water is poured and taken and sprinkled or splashed, and oil is applied. In ordination and confirmation hands are laid on a head. In marriage rings are given and received. And so on.

***In the gospels it says that Jesus 'took' a child and 'placed' the child in the midst of them. Before Jesus could speak words of significance regarding the child he engaged in the ritual action of placing the child in the centre of the gathered community.***

Accordingly Christian communities must design and implement ritual actions that take and place the child in the midst of the community. At the least this would include children engaged in the myriad roles that lay people assume in the church. Most importantly this would include children's participation in the liturgy; not merely, and only, as recipients of the work of the people but children as the people who do the work of the people.

In my congregation children are full participants in the celebration of the Eucharist, and are welcome to receive Holy Communion. Each Sunday she is there, Isabel. When she receives the wafer from me, she takes it, breaks it, and gives a piece of it to me. Each Sunday the Parish Priest receives his communion from a child. So who is ministering to whom?

Just imagine children as readers, as intercessors, as communion ministers. Imagine children assuming roles that have never before been

associated with lay ministries in the church because we have never before imagined children as lay ministers in the church. ***If Christian communities are to know and experience children as means of grace then those communities will need to learn how to take and place children into their very midst.***

#### **5. Sacraments utilise words of institution.**

Sacraments are almost always accompanied by words of institution: “Take and eat in remembrance that Christ died for you.” “I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” “I now pronounce you husband and wife.” “As with this oil you are outwardly anointed...” “Send down your Holy Spirit upon your servant whom we now consecrate”.

Are not the words of institution regarding the child as sacrament equally given to us? Indeed it could be argued that these words are more ubiquitous in the biblical text than other words used in dispensing other sacraments. Even in the absence of words of institution around sacraments like Confirmation and Holy Matrimony for instance, ***we have words that sound very much like words of institution: “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” And, “unless you become as a child, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.”***

#### **6. Sacraments are manageable.**

All the sacraments – two of the Lord, five of the Church – have been made manageable by the Church. We have policies, procedures, processes,

attached to these sacraments which protect their (apparent) integrity. We administer the sacraments according to clear criteria as to who may both give and receive them. As much as the sacraments are meant to be perceived as the work of God they are decidedly under the management of the Church. And so Berryman writes "...part of the strangeness of thinking about children as sacraments is that we are accustomed to thinking about sacraments as being something we can control".

***What then are we to do with the notion of the child as sacrament that perhaps cannot be managed?*** Children are, by their nature, not entirely controllable. Indeed in that sense they are entirely human. To the extent the child is the parent of the adult they manifest an unwillingness to be proscribed and managed. This is, perhaps, the human condition. And perhaps it is that condition which God is honouring as God's own. Perhaps the unmanageability of children tells us something about the nature of God. Perhaps the most significant way in which children are a means of encountering the divine is that they give us a glimpse of a playful God who cannot be controlled, cannot be managed. ***And I have a hunch that this is something we have lost; the wildly unpredictable, somewhat chaotic, entirely subversive nature of God. We have tamed God, controlled God, and managed God, when in fact our texts and traditions would suggest that our God is a compelling, demanding and unsettling God. In other words, just like a child.***

In conclusion it must be said that I am not seriously suggesting that children become an eighth or a third or a formal sacrament of the church. Indeed such a proposal may only result in objectifying or controlling them. But I am suggesting that if I were to propose formalising a child as an eighth sacrament that there is more scriptural and theological reasons for doing so than for many of the existing sacraments. What I am suggesting is that the case for seeing children as sacramental, as means of grace arguably instituted by Jesus, is a strong one.



***And so at the least this case should lead to a renewed effort take the child and place the child in our midst like Jesus, and proclaim that unless we become as a child we cannot fully know or fully enter the kingdom of God.***

I also hope that this case will cause us to re-think and re-formulate how it is we minister to children. Not as the future-of-the-church, children's ministry as our first shot at recruiting for the club. Not even children as the church-in-the-present, if that is only a tacit recognition of children as somehow important in the present if we are to have a future. To the contrary I am suggesting only that we minister to and with children as...children.

To speak of children as sacraments is, in many ways to subvert traditional forms of children's ministry that see children primarily as recipients, and not means of grace. To speak of children as sacraments is to subvert an all too common notion that sees them as empty vessels that need filling rather than as full vessels, overflowing with an innate spirituality that we would all benefit from being exposed to. To speak of children as sacraments is to subvert the sentiment that they are in need of information rather than seeing them as means of inspiration. As such, and here is my true purpose, I am proposing that a serious consideration of the sacramental nature of the child should be present as we plan and implement our ministry to and with children.

And so, in the spirit of Godly Play, some wondering...

I wonder if the child is telling us something of the nature of God?

I wonder if the child is a sign to us of what God values most about the human condition?

I wonder if we are never so much God's sign on earth as when we are like a child?

I wonder if the child is really how God wants to be known?

I wonder if the child as sacrament is a rebuke to the way in which we have prescribed how it is that God acts in the world?

I wonder what this all means for how we minister to and with children?

And I wonder, my friends, if the sacrament that best enacts God's presence in the world is the sacrament that won't sit still?