

USING THE BIBLE WITH CHILDREN

1. DO YOU KNOW YOUR BIBLE?

51% of pages of the OT in my Bible is taken up with law, poetry, wisdom & prophets and that's without extracting some 'law' elements which are mixed up with narrative. 37% of my NT is letters and vision. That means that overall, slightly over 48% of my Bible is non-narrative. Are we saying that about half the Bible is a 'no go area' for children? Has it therefore become a 'no go area' for adults. If so, what do we lose?

2. WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

'The Greatest Story Ever Told' – but what is the story?

A definition for the purposes of this session:

The Bible is a record of the struggle of a people to make sense of their experience of God.

Our children have to enter into that struggle in their own lives and experience, and they therefore need the full resources of the Bible to inform them. Also, if they are left with the impression that the 'story' of the Bible is all about whales swallowing people and fitting every species on earth into a wooden boat, they (and we) will be stuck at the level of, 'is it true?' in a literal way. 'Is it true that Jonah was swallowed by a whale?' can lead to the uncertainty and evasiveness which children spot a mile off as meaning, 'No, but I don't want to say so straight out'. 'Is it true that people have felt that God has a job for them and won't let them go until they've done it?' gives the opportunity for an emphatic and confident, 'Yes', followed by testimony from contemporary experience.

3. THEIR PART IN THE STRUGGLE

Our guiding principle should be to establish what each of the kinds of writing in the Bible contributes to 'the struggle of a people to make sense of their experience of God'. Then we can use examples of that kind of writing as one of our resources as we encourage the children to enter into that aspect of the struggle in their own lives.

The first part of the principle, involves our own development. And so should the rest. We should see our work with children as part of our own pilgrimage. We don't know all the answers, and we should communicate to children our own enthusiasm for being 'humble learners in the school of Christ'.

Biblical 'story writing' invites us to say where we are in the Bible story. We, and the children, also need to investigate where the Bible is in *our* story – the story of our daily lives: perhaps the other kinds of writing in the Bible are more helpful in achieving this end.

4. EXPLORING WITH CHILDREN

Examples of possible activities:

LAW

(NB This can be a good area to look at the beginning of a School Year, as many teachers will be setting up 'class rules' at this time)

- Pick examples of rules (written or unwritten) from social situations with which the children are familiar: what rules are there at school, in their family, in your Sunday/ Midweek Group, in Church, in Worship? Explore with the children why those rules are necessary (or whether they really are necessary!) in those situations – what is it about the situations that make the rules necessary? Who made the rules, and what did they want to achieve by them?
- Invite someone in a 'position of responsibility' who has to ensure the keeping of rules to talk to the children about the rules, what they are for, and how they feel about them: eg Church Warden; Choir Master/Mistress (music is an excellent example of the need for strict adherence to rules, otherwise chaos is very rapidly and very clearly evident!); clergy or reader; local amateur referee or umpire; police. 'People who help' could also talk about the rules which help them do their jobs.
- In September, negotiate and agree with the children a set of rules for your Group. Are they different from their class rules at school? Should they be? If so, why? How should they be presented to show their importance? How were rules presented and kept in the Bible?
- Look at some of the 10 Commandments – find ones which are part of the laws of our country and ones which aren't. Why are they not all part of our country's laws? As Christians, we believe God wants us to follow these commandments – what does he want to achieve by them? What kind of life does he want us to have? How does he feel about us?
- The laws in Deuteronomy could be seen as a 'blue-print' for a new life, a new start, in a new land. If the children were going to have a similar new start in a new land, what would their 'blue-print' be? This could be extended to a complete project on their ideal land with maps, drawings/models of buildings, etc. From their experience/understanding of God, what do they think God would want the 'blue-print' to be? Is the 'blue-print' they think God would want different from theirs? If so, why?

WISDOM

- Can the children remember any examples of good advice they have been given? Why was it good advice? – Tell the story (act out, draw a cartoon strip, narrate to the rest of the group). Who gave the advice? What does that tell you about the person who gave it?
- Invite an older member of the congregation to be interviewed about a piece or pieces of advice that has/have shaped their life – get them to talk about who advised and why. Draw a ‘map’ of the person’s life in the form of branching roads, showing each time a significant ‘turning’ was taken.
- Do some research, and produce a booklet or poster showing the different professional and volunteer advice agencies available in society.
- Take some of the sayings in the book of Proverbs (dip in to chapters 10–20) and help the children make up modern day stories which demonstrate someone following, or not following the advice. Act them out (possibly use puppets), with the proverb as a punch-line.
- Ask the children to find examples of children’s stories they know in which someone does or doesn’t follow advice. Ask the local school(s) if the children could do this as part of their school work, and bring the results back to church.
- Ask the children to find whole children’s stories which teach an aspect of ‘wisdom’ (cf the book of Job). This again could involve schools, particularly with reference to the National Curriculum Literacy Hour work on fables.
(“ write a story plan for own myth, fable or traditional tale” aged 7-8; “...identify ... the moral of the story...” aged 8-9; “...identify...the features of myths, legends and fables...” aged 9-10
- The National Literacy Strategy, DfEE)

POETRY

- Draw on National Curriculum Literacy Hour work on poetry and get children to analyse some of the songs they sing in church, and in worship at school as they would a poem in the Literacy Hour.
(“...discuss choice of words and phrases that describe and create impact ...” aged 7-8; “...understand the use of figurative language in poetry ... locate the use of simile...” aged 8-9; “...analyse how messages, moods, feelings and attitudes are conveyed in poetry ...” aged 10-11
- The National Literacy Strategy, DfEE)

- Find songs from church or school worship which have a clear structure, and get the children to write an extra verse.
*(“...use poems or parts of poems as models for own writing...” aged 5-6;
 “...to write metaphors...” aged 9-10
 - The National Literacy Strategy, DfEE)*
- Get the children to write their own worship songs, and make a tune (use a glockenspiel or set of chime bars in the pentatonic scale – ACDEG – ask a local school to borrow, and give a few hints on how to encourage children to compose).
- Find psalms, or parts of psalms which could be analysed or imitated as above.
- Sort a selection of psalms or sections of psalms into ‘psalms for different occasions’ depending on the mood or subject matter. Turn the results into an illustrated booklet with contents page, and headed sections. Ask a local primary school for hints on making attractive and innovative booklets.

PROPHECY

- Ask the children to tell the story of times they, or children they know have had to stand up for what is right against a more powerful person – eg a bully or ‘cock of the class’
- Ask the children to think of examples of unfairness in life, to identify who the ‘powerful person’ is in the situation, and to plan realistic steps which could be taken to put things right.
- Collect issues of injustice which the children feel strongly about (ask them to gather examples from the week’s editions of the children’s news programme ‘Newsround’) and plan a speech and/or leaflet about it
*(“...assemble and sequence points in order to plan the presentation of a point of view...” aged 8-9; “...write a balanced report of a controversial issue...” aged 10-11
 - The National Literacy Strategy, DfEE)*
- Look at a Biblical example of injustice (eg Naboth’s Vineyard – I Kings 21) or wrong doing and get the children to put together a speech denouncing it.
*(“...present (a) case to the class or a group...” aged 10-11
 - The National Literacy Strategy, DfEE)*
- Make a board game based on the successes and setbacks of a campaign to right an injustice.

- Ask the children to find examples in children's literature of characters standing up to injustice/unfairness eg "The Demon Headmaster" and use as the basis for work on the need to 'stand up for what's right' in life.

GOSPEL

- Working from the definition of 'gospel' as 'good news' collect examples of good news about Jesus from one of the gospels – ie good things he said or did. Sort these examples into categories. Look at newspapers, magazines, or 'Newsround' for items of 'good news', and see if any of them fit in the categories you have found from Jesus's life. Repeat with examples from Christian publications: church magazines, Christian Aid publications etc.

LETTERS

- Ask the children if they have ever received any letters. Did they keep them? If so why? Why do people keep letters? Have they ever sent any letters? What are the different reasons people send letters?
- Look at letters from bishops or vicars in parish magazines and similar. What different things have they written about?
("...read examples of letters for a range of purposes ...understand form and layout..." aged 7-8;
- Get the children to write to their bishop or vicar, asking them to write back to the group answering a question, or giving their opinion on some issue the group has been dealing with.
*("...write letters...selecting style and vocabulary appropriate to the intended reader..." aged 7-8; "...draft and write individual, group or class letters for real purposes..." aged 9-10
- The National Literacy Strategy, DfEE)*
- Look at some 'Letters to the Editor' in the local paper, or contributions to the letters page of some children's magazines. What are they about? Why do people take the time and trouble to write them? Why do the editors decide to print them?
("...read and evaluate letters eg from newspapers, magazines, intended to inform..." aged 9-10)
- What is the difference between writing someone a letter, e-mailing them, sending them a text message on a mobile, or talking on the phone/mobile?
- Look at the Epistle to Philemon, or a part of another epistle which addresses a specific situation. Ask the children to imagine the situation and make up a story or play about it – eg. What was going on in Philemon's household to make Onesimus run away?

STORY

- 'Hot seat' Matthew 19:13-15. Have groups representing the parents in the story and interview them as to why they wanted to take their children to Jesus. Another group representing the children is interviewed as to why they wanted to be with Jesus. A third group representing the disciples is interviewed as to why they wanted to send the children away.
- Find other Biblical stories of conflict involving 3+ characters or groups and 'hot seat' the characters.
- After reading a story, ask some open ended 'wondering' questions: "I wonder what part of the story you like best." "I wonder what part of the story is the most important." "I wonder who you are in the story. I wonder what part is about you." "I wonder if there is any part of the story we can leave out and still have the story."
(These questions are taken from 'Teaching Godly Play', Jerome Berryman, Abingdon Press 1995)

VISION

- Video some fantasy adverts from TV, or cut pictures from magazines. Discuss what sort of dreams they are promoting - eg 'if you buy this product it will make you: powerful/attractive/happy/young forever'. How are fantasy images used to create this message?
*("...evaluate advertisements for their impact..." aged 8-9
- The National Literacy Strategy, DfEE)*
- Ask the children to dream a dream for the future of themselves/ family/community/church and use images to represent the things they want to achieve, the obstacles they will come across, and what they will have to do to make the dream a reality.
- Do a 'guided imaging' exercise, taking the children through an imaginary journey, setting, situation or encounter, getting them to use all their senses as they build up the image, and encouraging them to make concrete images for abstract concepts eg 'a flower called love'.
- Look at some parts of the vision of a 'new heaven and a new earth' in Revelation ch 21 & 22 and ask the children to envision 'a new heaven & a new earth' as God would want it: paint it or make a collage.