



Practical input

3. Exploring the word on justice – reading the Bible at every age

This article is part of a series of resources exploring the relationship between worship and justice and how this specifically applies to children, young people and all-ages together. (Find the others, podcasts and more at www.thesanctuarycentr.org-whereverworldandworshipmeet-everyage or www.rachelturner.org.uk)

Like the other practical input sheets in this series, it is structured in two parts. The first provides a brief teaching overview on values, and the second explores practical approaches for parents and leaders to explore in order to apply these principles.

The big questions:

How can the Bible help children and young people explore the relationship between worship and justice in a way that they can understand?

What Bible stories deal with issues of justice?

Aren't there some bits of the Bible are children are too young to read?

Part 1 – Value input:

About three years ago, CEV published the first ever *Poverty and Justice Bible* – in it, every passage that talks about loving others, or caring for the poor, widows, orphans and strangers is highlighted. There's a lot of highlighted text! It confirms what many people have said for years – a Bible without the verses about poverty and justice would be a Bible full of holes. So isn't it surprising that these issues come up so infrequently in the Bible as we teach it to children and young people?

There seem to be three main possible reasons:

1. Many of our churches do not place enough emphasis on these issues, and their corresponding passages, in an adult context – so when we reduce down what we are focusing on to a child-sized portion, there's even less outward focus because of the economy of scale.
2. A lot of children mainly experience the Bible through paraphrased re-tellings of 'key' stories in collected volumes and anthologies. Most Children's Bibles contain a selection of stories, or an attempt to tell an overview which is helpful, but if only this approach is used, it is likely that the same themes will be stressed over and over again, and that in all likelihood, some content will be missed. As discussed in the first article in this series, *Telling the whole gospel – teaching about justice at every age*, age-appropriate has been defined around content, not approach, and therefore there is potential for sizeable gaps in the message we are conveying to children.
3. When we are using the full Bible as our source, we can still tend to be quite repetitive or selective in the passages we choose – understandably tending to land primarily on stories or parables that we considering interesting or engaging to children, a few of the more comfortable psalms, selected memory verses, and a

some key and memorable listing passages, such as Genesis 1-2 and creation, Exodus 20 and the ten commandments, and Galatians 5 and the fruits of the Spirit.

The Bible as background or foreground?

It all depends on your perspective as to whether the above reality is a problem. But for those of us that believe the Bible is the source of truth for living today it is concerning.

At what point do we introduce children to the rest of the text? How do we grow in them a deep love and hunger for scripture which will lead them to draw from its truth as they grapple with living their lives for God?

Are we building a picture of the Bible as a collection of stories rather than a manual for faith and life, which contains the precious words of Jesus and the insights of early Christian apostles into finances; marriage and singleness; sex and relationships; ambition and career; church life and more?

When our children are faced with an unjust world, will they even realise that this is not just a contemporary issue, and that the Bible has much to say about defending the rights of the poor, speaking up for what is right, and the times to submit or conscientiously object to authorities that are founded on different principles to those of God's kingdom?

Will they realise the Bible talks as much about partnering with God to transform his world, as it does about following Jesus and allowing him to transform them personally?

Allowing the text to lead us

There are two ways to approach the Bible – one is to start with what the text says and apply it to us; and one is to start with ourselves and look for how the Bible speaks into our particular situation, culture and context. Both are good and helpful!

However, if we place too much emphasis on the latter – whether due to key messages and truths we are particularly focused on, or through a desire to be age-appropriate, we may end up with a skewed approach.

Similarly, if our approach to scripture is always on application to our personal walk with God – brilliant as this is – we may fail to see how much the text is saying about how we should relate to others too.

What can the word teach children about justice?

In the midst of our excellent focus on teaching children about God's heart for them, we can end up forgetting to explore the implication of what that means about his heart for others. We do often cover the "should" of being outward-focused, telling children they should be nice to others as a way to thank God for his love for them – but we can forget to explain the "why". Coming back to scripture and helping our children perceive what it reveals about God's heart for people, his character, and his plans for our world, will naturally lead to an outward focus that isn't just bolted on as a "should", but is deeply rooted in their understanding of what it means to be follow Jesus.

Take some time to step back and consider what the Bible says about justice issues. You might find the *A biblical overview of the Bible, justice and poverty* (available to download at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-articles in the workshop notes section) helpful as a starting point, but then also spend some time exploring how Bible stories and parables, such as the ones listed

below, reveal God's heart for the lost, the poor and the broken and the kind of heart those who follow him have, and act on, for the sake of others:

1. Abram and Lot dividing the land after walking life together for so long and Abraham out of love and generosity giving Lot the first choice, and lived with the sacrifice (Genesis 13)
2. Hagar being seen and blessed by God, when abandoned by others (Genesis 16)
3. Joseph looking after his brothers' needs despite the way he had been treated (Genesis 45)
4. Shiprah and Puah – the midwives who disobeyed Pharaoh to save children's lives (Exodus 1)
5. God repeatedly hearing the "Ze'akah" cry of oppressed and distressed people's heart (e.g. of the Israelites when they were slaves in Egypt) and responding... how do we respond to others' "Ze'akah"? (e.g. Exodus 3)
6. Moses interceding for people who only moments before had been threatening his life and leadership (Numbers 14)
7. Ruth's compassionate determination to love her lonely and grieving Mother-in-law at the cost of her country and way of life (Ruth 1)
8. Ruth and the help she receives from Boaz (Ruth 2-4)
9. David bravely standing up for God's people against Goliath (1 Samuel 17)
10. Esther risking her life to seek the highest earthly authority to claim justice and freedom for her people (Esther 4)
11. Prophets like Jeremiah standing up for God's truth, and the rights of the poor, despite how they are treated by the rest of their society (e.g. Jeremiah 15:10)
12. Very many stories about Jesus' life and ministry that show him going after the outsider... for example Zaccheus (Luke 19) and the woman caught in adultery (John 8)
13. **Jesus laying down his life for others through the cross*** (Luke 23 and John 19), and also in the way that he considers others even in the midst of his own pain (e.g. his care for the thief; his words asking God to forgive his killers; and his concern for his mother and John) and/or human frailty (e.g. after seeking solitary time to process his grief at the murder of his cousin he has compassion on the crowds and ministers to them in Matthew 14).
14. The widow's mite and what that shows about a giving heart (Luke 21)
15. The good Samaritan and the importance of caring for people in need, even if they are different to us (Luke 10:25-37)
16. The way the early church shared resources (Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-37)
17. Lost sheep/lost coin/lost son parables focusing on God's love for the lost (often we perceive it as his love for us... but what does it mean if it refers to our neighbour?) (Luke 15)
18. Paul speaking out for the gospel in difficult and different situations (e.g. Acts 16; Acts 22-23)
19. Ananias praying for Paul, loving at great risk to himself and requiring much love for a man who brought such pain – compassion and courage stuff (Acts 9)
20. Paul and Silas not leaving the prison, but staying, saving the life of the jailer and then helping him meet God, potentially great cost for them to love him like that...(Acts 16:16-34)

*Clearly the gospel story itself is the ultimate key to helping children understand about God's kind of justice. That God doesn't decide whether to give his life for people on the basis of what they have done, but on the basis of who he is – love. That in grace he reaches out to everyone – whether we would class them as deserving or undeserving – giving everything for them. We just need to remember to talk children through understanding that the love God has for them, he has for others too.

Part 2 – Doing things differently

Families

- Try reading some of the suggested outward-focused bible stories provided above from a children's bible and reflect together about God's heart and purposes and how those people partnered with God.

- Find a story of justice or outward focus that is significant to you, and as a family write and illustrate your own version of it.
- Try reading actual scripture together... or using children's Bible notes (as opposed to just children's bibles) so that children become familiar with the Bible as a whole book. You'll find some recommendations of good resources and approaches for doing this in part 2 of the Sanctuary's guest-blog from Mum of two Frances Bryant, available at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/guestblog
- Try using translations that make use of modern-day language such as the New Century Version or The Message.
- Pick a verse from the *Bible overview* resource discussed above (on p2), and chat about what it means for you in your local area:
 - Who are the groups it talks about in your neighbourhood?
 - What actions might God be asking you to take to help?
 Then write the verse out in your own language, and with its personalised application, and put it on the wall by the front door to remind you of what God is asking of you as you step out of your home to join his loved ones.

Children's work

- Try reading, telling, or acting out some of the suggested outward-focussed bible stories provided above from a children's bible and reflect together about God's heart and purposes and how those people partnered with God. You could even invite different people in to play different characters and then ask them questions about whether it was hard to act in the way they did and/or why they chose to do what they did.
- We have found that children from around the age of 9 begin to be really intrigued by using concordances. Encourage them to explore looking up references to justice, mercy and love in concordances, or using an online tool such as www.biblegateway.com – or provide them with an overview of scriptures to look up and lead a discussion on these.
- **A note on content versus application**

During any one session it is difficult to cover everything! But it's important to start building the expectation with your children that you are looking to the Bible to teach us about our relationship with God *and* our relationships with others. This doesn't mean that every session has to bring this out in the application point – but that as you look across your curriculum, you can see some applications that are outward focused. It is good, however, to start intentionally looking for a place in the content where an outward focus can be brought in, even if this is not the central emphasis of that particular lesson.

For example, when telling the story of David and Goliath you may want or need to still focus on a more personal application, such as believing what God says about you, or knowing that you are still important despite the fact that you are young. But that doesn't mean that during the telling of the content of the story you can't emphasise how David (and God) responded to the needs of the Israelites.

By ensuring the content includes both loving God and loving others as the core underpinning themes, you begin to build a different expectation and outlook. This also means that on another week when you do choose to bring through an outward focused application, it has more continuity with the rest of your curriculum, and you can be confident that you can still include personal elements in the content.

Balancing personal and outward focused elements across the content of your curriculum in this way also begins to build an expectation of both in children, so that as they grow older and can handle multiple layers of application, this transition is both more natural and self-evident.

- **A note on unpacking concepts like orphans, widows, strangers and the poor**

When you look at justice issues in the Bible (and particularly in the law or epistles) certain words and concepts crop up a lot. It's worth doing some study around these terms with children – both to ensure they understand what these terms mean in the Biblical context, and why God was so particularly concerned to cite these groups as needing help.

Spend some time helping them map out who the equivalent groups of people might be today – so that they can apply some of these verses to how Christians should act towards people who have less than them, people who are lonely, people who are new or different, and people who are vulnerable.

Youth work

- Try looking at relevant justice Bible verses or passages and thinking through what the different challenges and encouragements would be in different settings... e.g. Amos 2:6 in *The Message* applied to Christians living in the UK who are reasonably well off, those who are poor, or to those working in sweatshops to make trainers in Asia etc...
- Try using some of the outward focused Bible stories and parables above and encourage the young people to role-play and explore the motivations and challenges facing different characters. Consider inviting them to create sketches which explore parallel modern day settings for some of the stories.
- Most young people, like adults, are able to cope with multiple applications. Begin building in an expectation, through content and application, that when we are reading the Bible; studying particular topics; or reflecting on our faith, we should be considering our relationship with God *and* our relationships with others. Also encourage them to begin exploring their spheres of influence, working outwards from their family and friends, to those in their school, college and community, through to wider society and their country, and those they are linked with globally as a result of their consumer and lifestyle choices.

All-ages together

- All-age settings can be good for discussing our responses to particular scriptures and how these should be applied in our lives.
- Try using some of the above outward-focused Bible stories and parables alongside the stories of Christian heroes of the faith who have also exemplified similar actions or attitudes. For example, you could talk about David and Goliath from a justice point of view – David though seemingly no match for Goliath, chooses to stand up for the people of Israel who are being oppressed by the Philistines, and through God's strength wins a great victory. And then go on to talk about how people like Wilberforce, Corrie Ten Boom and Martin Luther King used whatever gifts and skills they had to resist and challenge giant injustices.