

ON READING THE BIBLE WITH ONE'S CHILDREN

BY NICOLETTE GRAY

WE have read the Bible together (children of both sexes, now 8-17 years old) for about six years, every evening, in principal as part of a very informal sort of family prayers. We have read about a chapter at a time, reading always one of the gospels between Christmas and Easter, but otherwise usually reading straight on till we came to this annual, or some other natural or enforced break. So we have read from Genesis to the end of Job, Daniel, Jonas and parts of Isaiah, Ezechiel and Jeremiah, Machabees, the Acts, three Pauline epistles and the Apocalypse; some books once, most two or three times. One wonders what difference it makes to the minds of children growing up in the modern mental chaos, this ordinary Bible-reading, which has in so many centuries been the ground of Christian education, but which is, I fancy, rather rare among Catholics today. Of course the children cannot tell one. 'So far I think it has been more useful than the Latin I have learnt' (12 years; little enough Latin, I fear!). Only the 15-year-old seems to have much consciousness or interest in what she may have gained. One thing, however, is unanimous: they like it. 'I want to you go on and on and on' (8). And in general they prefer the Old Testament: 'It is more like storytelling, easier to understand' (11). 'I am not sure I like St Peter and St Paul' (8). Only the eldest (17) is tired of the historical books and wants to read the prophets and the epistles. The three youngest say their favourite book is the Apocalypse. With two that is perhaps because it is fresh in their minds. The devotion of the third (12) is two years old or more and it provides the favourite subjects of his drawings.

I have tried in these notes to gather such children's reactions as I could, but in the main I feel that all I can say is what I myself have learnt in company with children; though that must have some relation to what we have all learnt together. And first I would say what an advantage today this reading in company with children seems to me to be. Reading or talking with grown-ups, or even alone, one is constantly aware of all that complex of problems and difficulties involved between the Bible and the

assumptions of the modern world. With children there is simply themselves, the words of the book, and in a matter-of-fact sort of way, God, who wrote the book. So one goes straight on understanding what one may, trying perhaps occasionally between us to find some larger meaning, but in general leaving it at that. I think that is part of our idea of reading straight on through lists of names and stories 'suitable' and 'unsuitable'. It is a sort of voyage of discovery, for even when we have read the book before, no one remembers it very well—in fact, a wide remembered knowledge of the Bible does not, disappointingly, seem to be ours. The child who seems to remember least tells me it is 'ingrained'. I hope so. That is in a way what I hope for more. That it should become part of the texture of the mind, the unconscious terms of thought, which may, like the poetry one learnt in childhood, be later inhabited more richly; that it may form images, leave behind trails of sequences which may be there to be picked up by the constant Biblical references which are around us mentally and physically in our cultural tradition, but particularly in the liturgy.

Our voyage of discovery is also I feel a voyage into reality, in one sense in virtue of this same reading of the authentic words as they are. That is something which is possible in family reading where questions can be answered, or not answered; which is obviously not possible at school. It seems to me an important thing that perhaps only a parent can do, to treat a child with the respect of presenting to him God's word as it is, and yet, in the common reading, preserving something objective.

Again, in another more vivid sense, I feel it is a voyage into reality. Perhaps for the child a distinction between discovery and reality is unreal. For surely 'reality' has a very different meaning for children from the common sense materialism which seems to be the normal adult assumption today. I asked why they liked the liturgy. 'Because it is so life-like' (15). That strikes one as an extraordinary answer; yet on reflection it corresponds with what one notices, and with such little as I have read of the observation of child psychologists. Symbolism and dramatisation are a young child's natural means of exploring reality. He is usually perfectly aware that his symbol or his play is something in itself as well as having a likeness to something else unknown, but partly explored by means of this likeness. Surely the Old Testament in particular, and the Church's interpretation of it, are therefore naturally

sympathetic to children. 'It is story-telling, easier to understand' (11), 'I like it because it is good to read a book one does not understand' (15) are not contradictions but complementary. There is the story, fascinating and memorable in itself, and behind the story is God's meaning. One does not need to point out; over and over again it is obvious from the nature of the story. Nor does a child I think expect to understand the meaning, as with the more explicit, and therefore much more difficult, it seems to me, New Testament words. He is glad there is more behind—that, after all, makes it more interesting. I notice that children like and expect to read a book over and over again—but for the time being surely it prefers to put up a symbol, a stabilisation which later it may be interesting to explore or aggregate to. One child (7) did a drawing from memory of Bath Abbey façade. 'What is that thing in the door?' 'Why, the Lamb of God, of course.'

The life-likeness of the Old Testament stories is indeed vivid and I notice the children enjoy too the crude physical detail that everyone knows at home, often so near to a child's experience—'so often the sins seems to be just like one's own, it is like following your own life' (15). And again, is not the constant direct intervention of God 'lifelike'? Surely the child with faith expects the God who it knows to be there to show himself actively in any true description of events. Is not the Bible really the only matter-of-fact account of human life that probably comes their way? School history books have carefully abstracted the God they learn about in a different lesson; other (truer?) books substitute different names, fairies, magic, Jupiter.

And are not these human but eye-open Bible people, the people to live with? For surely in childhood, if not later, one lives so much with the people about whom one reads? And in one's experience one draws on their experience? On the other hand I must admit that my eldest son (17), who does not like novels, does not, now at any rate, find the Old Testament people very much alive. 'I am more interested in the superhuman figures, like Samson.'

One hears so often that the Old Testament gives too frightening an idea of God. In the sense of an obsessive fear I have not seen any sign. But then we are always on God's side! 'Are you not afraid reading about things like the destruction of Core, Dathan and Abiron?' 'No, one feels a sense of triumph' (12). Is not con-

fession really a safeguard against that sort of fear? And for the other sorts do not children know anyhow a great deal about fear? Is it not better that it should be of something true, and a beginning of wisdom? 'I think God should be terrible; it's all made too comfortable' (12). This was really a reference to a school talk on the gospel when they had been told not to worry about the Second Coming. They enjoy immensely, I notice, manifestations of God's power, his exactingness, his otherness, his terribleness. They expect sin to be found out and punished, faith and rectitude ruthlessly demanded (and apply such standards themselves where practical conditions allow, to dolls, imaginary servants, etc.). It seems to me indeed that young children are more interested in a transcendent than an incarnate God, and in a way find the former easier to realise. The God of Mount Sinai or the Apocalypse is far more real than baby Jesus. Indeed, Jesus-on-the-Cross than Jesus-a-child-like-you. 'God in heaven: surely the Apocalypse gives you the best idea?—very glorious: you can only think of him as light.' (11).

One hopes to be a Bible-christian, but also a Mass-christian. I happened to have to read the 'Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction', and I wondered in what way a Catholic Bible reading should be richer than the thorough study there planned. It seemed to me because in more than one sense one hopes by reading to live it, or concisely, one needs to read it liturgically. Surely the Church's interpretation, which is what one hopes to give one's children, is in the liturgy. And in my experience, the liturgy, like the Bible, comes naturally to children: when quite little they have not only endured, but insisted on standing through long Holy Week services, and following, for example, the Holy Saturday prophecies. 'Why do you like it?' 'It makes me feel good' (8). 'One likes doing what has been done for a very long time' (12). But also, surely, it is the dramatisation which is instinctive to him; the reliving, and yet being oneself, which satisfies and enthral the half-comprehending child? We most of us elaborately and intellectually try to recapture a symbolic and liturgical sense. I wonder, if one were sufficiently soaked in the Bible, whether one need ever lose it?