

Creating a Feel for A Christian Way of life

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Heavily pregnant, I remember being told by well-meaning Christians that “The family that prays together, stays together.” It was said in such a lugubrious voice that it sounded an ordeal. It was. The problem is that those who say it never tell you how to do it. There are no liturgies for family prayers in any prayer book. Do you call the children in from the garden, or tell them to switch off the television, put away their toys and say, “Stop playing, we’re going to pray”? It doesn’t exactly guarantee prayer a popularity vote. Not is the “God bless Mummy and give me a new bicycle for my birthday” routine last thing at night any more satisfactory, tacking prayer onto the rest of life, hiving the spiritual off from the secular. A child’s spirituality is instinctive - like breathing. Adults can make it uncomfortable, boring, or even embarrassing. Children smell a lack of integrity.

My most abiding memory of childhood was Friday evening, the start of the Sabbath, the one evening in the week when my gregarious, socialising parents never went out. My mother, a totally unreligious woman most of the time, lit the Sabbath candles and prayed for her children, my GP father rushed out of his surgery, quickly exchanged white coat for skullcap and read the familiar prayers. We all sang the traditional blessings, drank sticky-sweet Palwen red wine, ate the plaited chollah bread and enjoyed the best meal of the week.

There were other festivals celebrated in the home - New Year, Pentecost, and Passover especially, when the table was laden with mouth-watering goodies, the cloth bleached white to dazzling cardboard stiffness, the polished silver reflecting a dozen distorted mirror images of our faces in the dancing candlelight, and the wine glowing like liquid rubies in the goblets. We sang, prayed, ate, joked, gossiped, and laughed, as the great drama of our people’s redemption was told again, illustrated by a host symbols like horseradish and parsley that made it seem recent, as if we had been there. My grandfather fell asleep - and he was leading the service. There was no division between what was spiritual and what wasn’t. The entire evening, lasting several hours, was all one seamless whole.

As a child, I never remember feeling second class. We had a key role to play. We didn’t need colouring books or distractions, there was enough entertainment without them. No one shushed us as the adults were making more noise. There was no “sit still, fold your hands, bow your heads, and close your eyes”, those extraneous rituals that children discard with God at adolescence.

It obviously wasn’t enough as I became a Christian. But the atmosphere, the traditions, the familiar stories filled me with such a sense of awe and wonder that they ensured God’s a place at the centre of my life. Judaism does not attempt to pass on belief, rather an indescribable feel for a Jewish way of life, a climate in which faith will blossom naturally. Christianity, on the other hand, which stalwartly maintains that God has no grandchildren, tries to enforce belief, without

instilling any feel for a Christian way of life. It's an inevitable outcome of devolving responsibility for that belief to the church. An institution is no substitute for the home.

I wanted my children, wherever life took them, to associate Christianity with the best not the most boring moments of childhood. So we introduced a family Sabbath, one night when we were always together as an extended family around the mealtable, adopting surrogate grannies, aunts and uncles, single people from our church family since our real family were so far away. Friday was the obvious choice as the end of the week - but it didn't have to be. I lit candles welcoming weekend rest, laid my hand on the children's heads and prayed for their individual needs, asking God to make them grow up to be like the great spiritual leaders of our people. We shared a cup of wine, symbol of relaxation and rejoicing, and the plaited loaf representing human work and labour. We recalled how Jesus had said, "When you do this, remember me", then ate our favourite food.

We were living in Yorkshire and it was the miners' strike. Six-year old Joel knew his schoolfriends went to bed cold and hungry. So he prayed for those who had no bread, no work, no heat. And then he prayed for the famine in Ethiopi, and the adults would wonder if we were ever going to eat. In time musical instruments appeared - anything from guitars to a comb wrapped in greaseproof paper, or knives clinked against the glasses.

My husband Peter also read the scriptures to the children in our king-size bed every morning, and it was a bit of a squeeze when they were teenagers, but Friday evenings were foundational. Joel went on having a Friday meal - even in his university room, inviting in his fellow students to share it with him. It's a wonderful way of creating extended family and community, as well as a focal point for worship.

The UK is not a child-friendly nation. Instinctively we believe children should be seen but not heard, and the church still tuts at them and banishes them. There has to be some decorum in worship, but Christians have so confused silence with wonder, and intensity with solemnity that we make our children self-conscious not God-conscious, stifling their instinctive expression of worship. Instead of shedding our sophistication and becoming as little children ourselves, we try to turn our children into miniature adults with all our hang-ups, and are surprised when they want none of our God. It's time we created occasions - primarily at home and in home or house groups - where we can not only involve them, but sit at their feet and learn with them.