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Working with Children

Psychodrama in biblical context: Bibliodrama

Introduction

This article describes my way of working with children and their parents. It is mainly aimed at the practice. It stays well away from theological and bible-theoretical interpretations and points of view. Bibliodrama actively opens up the richness and present day relevance of biblical stories. In this case for a very special target group. Viz. Children. The main part of this article consists of examples of my experiences with bibliodrama with children (see 1). It will show you what my way of working is, and what possibilities it has. Finally I will explain in a reflection (see 2) what drives me and what should be a psychodrama director's attitude towards this way of working with children.

It started out as follows:

In our town all children are given a real bible at the occasion of their confirmation either by their school or the church. But after leaving primary school many of these children never read this bible, if they did so in the first place. Moreover many Roman catholic parents do not have the tradition of reading the bible with their families or for themselves.

That put me two challenges:

- How can you make them appreciate and use this ceremonial present?
- How can you make a child and his parents/carers enthusiastic towards biblical stories?

1.

Bibliodrama with children in practice.

In Son and Breugel, a small town in the south of the Netherlands, bibliodrama is a fixed part in the preparation towards their confirmation for both children and their parents.

1.1 The location and the group.

Usually the meeting takes place in a gymnasium and everybody is seated in a large circle on gymnasium benches or little school chairs. There are a few extra chairs that can be used in certain 'scenes'. There are about 30 catholic children from every primary school with their parents, resulting in a group of about 50 to 60 persons including a priest or pastoral worker, volunteer mothers, working in the confirmation preparation, and the bibliodrama director.

1.2 Expectations.

Usually nobody is acquainted with bibliodrama, except some of the organisers of the preparation. The children and their parents have been informed, both verbally and in writing, that the programme involves something to do with the bible, called bibliodrama. More often than not the children have some form of drama at their schools and therefore they have certain expectations about what will happen. Most of them think that stories from the bible are boring; they are ancient stories that have no relation whatsoever with the present day.

Catholic children at catholic school know few bible stories, from the family masses in church, sometimes from school, television or library books. Those who go to the protestant school are familiar with the bible. At that school there is a daily reading of bible passages, prayers and discussions about biblical topics.

All these children from different school, but all from the last year at primary school are now in one group.

1.3 The relationship between the bibliodrama director and the parents.

The bibliodrama director is me. At first, I used to know many of the children, because they were at the same school as my own. I used to work there as a lunchtime volunteer and gave improvisation classes. Or I knew them from sports clubs. Nowadays our own children have left home, so that I do not know today's children nor their parents, and this is mutual.

As I know nothing about the children's background I have to rely on my ability to improvise. Luckily it seems to work as both the children and their parents have expressed, afterwards, that they thought it was fun and inspiring.

1.4 *The meeting itself.*

Time for this meeting is restricted to one and a half hours. For this reason I use mainly short ways of working.

Phase 1. The introduction.

This is a warming up and trying to tune in with the children and their parents. The warming up consists of:

- Chatting, who I am (the director), something about myself and why I am doing this.
- Something about the meaning of the word 'confirmation', where it comes from and what does it stand for. What are your parents hopes concerning your confirmation.
- Something about themselves; which schools are present, do you know each other? etc.
- Link up with the frame of reference of those present and the questions they are dealing with; "What do I do with the bible? The stories in it are boring' etc. that is something I often hear, I do not agree with this, if I did, I wouldn't be here...."
- The bible is a book about people, people with feelings and thoughts, people who experience things and call themselves "children of God", people like you and I.

Phase 2. Preparation of acting by means of mini-action.

To activate the group and have them get used to acting and putting ideas into scenes I start with a number of mini-actions. We bring this about by trying to imagine different locations where stories in the bible took place, such as: by the waterside, on the sand, in an open space, on a mountain, around a tree or a closed space. I try not to take them by surprise, so I tell them what we are going to do. Below a report of one such mini-action.

"If I say water, what story do you think of? Do you know any story from the bible that involves water? If you do, I will ask you to tell something of that story, so that everybody will get to know it and then I will ask you to act some of it out. I will ask you three questions:

1. *Who are you in this situation, what does that person do, show us.*
2. *What could this person probably feel at that moment? Not necessarily the exact feelings that may occur in the bible, as they are not often written down anyway. But they must have thought something or felt something at the time.*
3. *And then I will ask you after you have acted this out: Is that it? Then you can go back to your place and you are no longer the person you acted, but yourself again. So it is very short, and if you like you can all take turns.*

More often than not it is surprising how much the children know about the stories, and if they do not know anything it is even more surprising how involved and interested they get in what the others are telling or acting out. They really want to get into these stories from the bible. There are many stories involving water. Apparently some favourites. Below some examples.

- *Moses in his basket and the princess.*

A girl said: 'I am the princess, I am at the water side and I see a little basket in the water'. I ask her: 'What might the princess think when she sees the basket?' The girl/princess answers: 'What a pretty basket'! Everybody starts to laugh and the girl, startled, looks at me, worried that they are all laughing at her. I am standing beside her and say: 'It is very well possible that that is exactly what the princess thought. This princess obviously loves pretty things and she recognises pretty things when she sees them, so she sees a pretty basket. Probably this princess couldn't see baby Moses from the riverbank. It's a good thing she has an eye for pretty things, otherwise she would never have seen the basket and Moses would not have been saved'. The girl looked at me gratefully. As I asked her: 'I bet you like pretty things, don't you?' she laughed, and so did her parents, She said: "Very much so".

This little incident was an eye-opener to the group. There are more than one way of looking at things, more reasons to do things and preferences. Every parent and child, who already had his image of a little basket with legs or arms sticking out, now had a new image to think about.

- *Somebody walking on the water.*

Many times it appeared that children thought that only Jesus was able to walk on water. But so could Peter. During the acting out there is a lot of laughter as the children themselves walk, surprised, taking it for granted, sinking into the water or rolling on the ground etc. When they lie down, I always make

them stand up again and then I ask them: What might he have thought or felt when he was walking on the water?

It is essential that they stand up again before speaking for practical as well as emotional reasons. Lying down may evoke less pleasant associations to both parent or child, which I want to avoid, and practical because people tend to speak very softly when lying on the ground.

- *John the Baptist, who baptizes many people and then Jesus as well.*

Heard reactions: "Hey I know that one, he got famous' That I am allowed to baptize him'!

- *In the boat during a storm, frightened disciples and Jesus asleep.*

"Jesus, do something, I'm afraid, We're afraid" or "You needn't be afraid, I am with you" of "I wasn't sleeping".

Very often, after acknowledging and thanking the child I offer the opportunity for other alternatives. "It's very well possible that Jesus, Peter, John etc felt or thought like that. Can you think of other possibilities? What different things might they have felt or thought? This way an array of opinions, thought and feelings, different interpretations appears, brought up by the children themselves (sometimes even their parents, who can't help themselves)

The same kind of mini-actions apply to sand, tree, enclosed space etc.

Phase 3. Acting

Now the group is ready for something new, a different way of working.

I try to build bridges now, link present and past, look past cultural differences. The old testament, e.g. is very important for the Jews. It tell their history. Muslims, Jews and Christians write about the same Abraham etc. I try to find common roots. We discuss the difference between the Old and New Testament. I end by saying that it is a good thing that the bible does not really talk about feelings and thoughts, allowing us to imagine those for ourselves.

Then I introduce the new way of working. With shy, anxious groups I show them what they can expect once or twice. Often trying out new things myself, to prevent myself from getting stuck in routine.

This new way of working we call "the opposite"

Everybody can join in. The structure is simple. You can show how to do it, and the children and their parents know what it's all about. I like this way of working not just because we developed it ourselves, but also because it involves a sense of humor, relativisation and depth.

Below you will find two examples.

The opposite and the parable of the Lost Son.

I ask them if they know this story and if so, who can tell it. Usually they think it's quite normal, and therefore not very interesting, that the father welcomes the son back into the family. Besides, it's not very interesting if you know how it is going to end anyway. That's what the children say. Everything changes when I say:

Any man has moments in his life when he has to make a choice. 'Living is making choices'. To do or not to do. In this situation the father had to make a choice. Either accept his son back again, or reject him. We could try to find out, what arguments he might have had for not accepting him back.

In the middle of the circle I place a chair, the 'no-chair' for the father who doesn't want his son back, and another one, the 'yes-chair' for the father who does. You can see both children and parents wondering: Can she do that, He takes him back, doesn't he? But we start with the 'no-chair'. It appears that children are excited to explore what this chair stands for. Sometimes the children are so surprised or prejudiced that there is no room for independent thinking or using their imagination. Then I take the lead: 'No, I will not accept him back. He might have contracted a frightening bug. He has changes so much etc. I ask the group if they think he might have thought that. Then they come up with lots of other ideas for the 'no-position'

"Maybe he's just here for a rest, and will disappear again"

"Maybe he's involved with the wrong friends"

"He may be addicted"

"Is he only back for the money"?

"Is he trying to pick a fight"?

"He has hurt me so many times already, I don't want to live through that again. Can I trust him? Etc.

Their arguments can be so convincing you can hardly imagine the father allowing the son back into his home, his life.

Not until the group runs out of possibilities for the no-position, we move on to the yes-chair. This because of the clear structure, and because of the fact that you want to end the story is it is written in the bible. I say: 'Well the father has plenty of arguments for not taking his son back, but the bible says he does anyway. What do you think he might have thought or felt when he made that decision?'

This time the children, nor their parents need encouragement:

'I've missed him so much, thank God he's alive'

"He looks so bad"

"How brave of him to come and face me"

"He hasn't forgotten me"

"My wife will be so happy"

"I've hoped so hard for so long, that he would come back"

Then I ask: What did you notice in what the father said both in the no-chair and in the yes-chair? The answer: "In the no-chair he was afraid and in the yes-chair he loved him, he might have been torn between the two" etc.

After that we read the bible passage and I ask them what strikes them now. Usually they notice quite a few things and talk about it and with interest and without holding back.

This way a boring old story becomes interesting again.

Sometimes you notice, as a director, that the parents make a link between the acting in this situation and their own real life, they identify with it as a parent, brother or sister or child. For this reason it is a good thing that the exercise has a lot of action and a simple structure.

- *The opposite and the story of Jesus' temptations in the desert.*

Again we work with two chairs, the first one represents the temptations by the devil. You might call it the: "that doesn't sound bad chair". This chair will evoke many a funny moment in which we laugh a lot. Thoughts that have arisen on this chair:

"I am so hungry, why not turn these stones into bread, otherwise I might die",

"Nobody will ever doubt my supernatural powers",

"Where is God now that I need him so badly" and

"What if every stone actually did turn into bread. There would be no more hunger in the world",

sometimes followed by a moment of silence while this idea sank in.

The other chair represents 'no' again:

No I won't listen to the devil –

I won't do the devil a favour –

I only put my faith in God –

the devil will only make me do something else again –

God will not leave me alone, etc.

Phase 4. The sharing, reading the passage.

Finally, as I described before in the first example, I ask the group what parts of the story they knew and could apply in their own lives. Then we read the passage from the Bible, looking for the most striking and relevant parts after having done the exercises above.

(intervention: What strikes you now in the text after what we just did?)

1.5 Group's process.

Sometimes it is not necessary to find a way of working beforehand, the group itself may offer the relevant way.

E.g. the last time, 2007, there was a group, part of which consisted of a number of girls, who were obviously determined not to take part. There appeared to be two "leader" girls who set the rules within this group. As there were girls from other primary schools as well, these did not confirm with these group rules, so they reacted naturally, from within themselves.

During the process of the meeting it became clear that in the previous preparation for their confirmation (due to a new pastor) the bible passages had been studied less than in the years before. The abstract theme that "God is Love" had been touched upon, but not explicitly; it had sort of been taken for granted. Only the children that went to protestant primary schools, appeared to know quite a lot about the bible. By coincidence, these were mainly boys. The funny thing was, that this time, unlike previous years, the boys enthusiastically volunteered their stories and to act out the situations, without any reservations. They clearly enjoyed showing off their superior knowledge. (bible-knowledge-

machoism!?) The quiet girls became even more silent, trying to keep up the appearance of not taking part by choice. I couldn't let this go on, so something had to happen.

I asked: 'Okay boys, you know a lot of stories and I appreciate your enthusiasm, and it is obvious that the girls do not know any stories, because fewer stories have been taught this year. Do you know any stories about famous girls or women in the bible? Tell us about them, try to act out some of these stories. What could these women have felt or thought?

Judging by their raised hands, the boys immediately knew lots of women. The non partaking group of girls was surprised. Eventually we saw quite a number of strong, brave women in our room. Mothers appeared to be proud about so many strong women, fathers were proud of the knowledge and guts their sons displayed. The girls warmed up to the situation and we had a long discussion about men and women in the bible afterwards.

2

Reflection.

2.1. What makes me do this?

- *Having fun with stories with and by children.*

From an early age, I used to tell stories to my younger sisters and neighbouring children. We made them up as we went along. I would tell them and they would add something. We used everything available to create a new world, wooden spoons, a match, dolls and sometimes cuddly toys. All these objects got a different name and function. Not even I knew where the story would take us and how it would end. We used to laugh a lot about naughty animals or children and cry about the sad things that could happen to them. One of the unwritten rules was, that every story had a happy ending. Sometimes it took a very long time to get there, because of all the difficult situations our main character would get caught up in.

Fortunately no adults ever interrupted these 'sessions' even though they might have considered them too long. We would spend hours even days in our room or in the street, telling and completing the stories. Sometimes we were asked to keep it down a bit, and above all try to keep the stories a little less sad and emotional, as we would end our sessions red eyed from either laughing or crying, exhausted by the excitement. Together we created our own world, were open to each other's ideas and went along with the feelings our stories evoked. All the fun of these past experiences came back up again in my work with children as a improvisation-drama mother, lunch time volunteer in which the children and I made up stories, in very much the same way. It is amazing to see how imaginative and creative the children can be in trying to come up with a happy ending. It is a great way to pick up on underlying signals; how the other person is.

It appeared that psychodrama, and in some ways bibliodrama may offer similar opportunities.

- *Having fun in bibliodrama or psychodrama in a biblical context.*

In bibliodrama with children (the way we do it) you tell and act out stories together. You work with personal memories, images, interpretations. You see the influence these stories or biblical persons may have on their lives. Children and adults enrich each other stories playfully without doctrine.

- *Believing, thinking and inspiring each other.*

The bible, seen as a book written for people by people who believe in a God (a higher power) and in life after death (as do I) offers a lot of food for thought. Especially since all kinds of human situations are described. And even though these stories are about people it is hardly ever explicitly mentioned how they may have felt or what they may have thought. This omission allows room for possible appreciation of imagination, life experience, empathy and suggestions of interesting chains of thought (very much like the traditional Jewish Midrasj).

Because the people in the bible have some kind of relationship with God (as do the children about to be confirmed and their parents) it is possible to bring God into play in any form of bibliodrama.

- *New views/perceptions.*

Bibliodrama involves children's minds, imagination, ingenuity , and sometimes even feelings. It is very often a completely new experience for the group members to be able to shift attention from one point of view to another. Dead and/or boring stories come to life. It's possible to feel what they felt, to see their troubles and happiness.

A higher goal for these evenings is that the children and their parents will pick up the bible when dealing with important moments in their lives. Realizing that they can fall back on their belief in a loving God. They may even find inspiration in the New Testament in which Jesus and his disciples lived according to this very belief: God is Love. They did not get involved in the situation of hostility and occupation (by the Romans) around them. Wars, cruelty, rising to power were no part of the way they looked at life. They looked at life from a more cosmic perspective, not dealing with material matters, they acted from their ideas of :love thy neighbour as thou lovest thyself.

2.2. Human dilemmas

All the questions that can be asked of the persons from the bible or of God himself are legitimate. Interesting to both children and adults, especially because they have usually not been asked before, because we never gave it another thought.

- *What would the lost son's brother have thought when he saw his father with his brother? What did he say, according to the story? What might he have meant? Was there a mother involved? What would she have thought?*
- *What will Isaac have thought, when he went up the mountain with his father, but without a sacrificial animal?*
- *Josef's father, didn't you realize that, by favouring Josef you made your other children envious? Or didn't you realize you were favouring him?*

These events can easily be imagined and understood, as we can imagine the dilemmas they had to face and apply their situations to our own. Of course it's easier for older people to do so with all their life's experiences, but it is amazing to see how twelve-year-olds can adopt the character of a leader, e.g. Moses, or of a traitor or a victim.

2.3 The desirable attitude for a bibliodrama with children director (from my point of view)

It feels like a paradox, that you have to apply strict, even restricting rules to come to a fixed structure in a process that is meant to activate, creativeness, learning, imagination, respect and love in young people.

This way of working does not allow for the "old fashioned" kind of teacher, who works from a position of superiority; he knows best, because of his experiences and education.

The director should be open minded towards the children's way of thinking and show respect for their input. Therefore it is advisable a director has the following skills:

- *Be predictable and safe*
 1. *Explain the procedure before each different form of acting out and demonstrate it*
 2. *Let each child be the protagonist for only a limited period of time.*
 3. *See that you get as many protagonists as possible, but have them work in clearly structured and short situations. Try to keep it light-hearted.*
- *Allow room for more than one interpretation (avoid moralizing)*
- *Try to be the safe haven and try to create constructive and positive experiences with each other.*
- *Have children learning from each other.*
- *Don't force anything. In case they are reluctant show them some possibilities.*
- *Allow for the children imagination*
- *Try to involve those who do not always react primarily.*
- *Be sensitive towards emotional reactions deal with them appropriately.*
- *Be imaginative, flexible and ingenious. Have fun, laugh and show them that the people had fun in those days as well. They had a sense of humor too, they had their hopes and jokes. It wasn't always serious in those days either.*
- *Approach the child positively, don't let it be the laughing-stock of those present. (Of course this applies to the parents as well) So, if necessary be able to put the words into a more positive light. Don't make it too heavy.*
- *Ask open questions and do not put words into anyone's mouth.*
- *Any kind of input is okay. Some of the best director's reactions are: "yes, that's possible" or "it is possible that felt/thought like that, what else can he have thought?"*
- *Read the relevant passage from the bible and discuss it afterwards, leaving room for anyone's input.*

If you feel that you have many of these qualities, please give bibliodrama a go.

Information.

Psychodrama is a method to sort out certain issues and experience them safely and constructively, using positive strengths and knowledge within a group.

This article reports of a particular way of working with bibliodrama: just once, with a large group.

Our usual way of doing bibliodrama has the same features as the psychodrama, taught by the Eleftheries.

Jan P.M. Lap and Marjorie Lap-Streur, in turn, have developed the method into the "Deanhuis model" of psychodrama in biblical context.

We offer educate and train people to become directors of psychodrama as well as bibliodrama.

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