

Mister Ack

When I was a child our Sunday School superintendent was a man named Mr Akroyd, a tall, dark, thinly- faced Baptist layman in his fifties. Looking back now, I can see that he didn't have the faintest idea how to relate to children. He never used any gimmicks. He never pandered to our wants or tried to make things more interesting. He made no attempt to entertain us. He treated us as if we were all miniature adults.

Every Sunday, summer or winter, he would turn up in his black three-piece suit. I suppose there were at least a hundred children in the senior school, with another fifty or so in the kindergarten. The older group met in the main church, where we sat on the church pews, swinging our feet above the plain, dusty floor-boards that we couldn't reach. It was only in later years that the church could afford carpet, and then only in the aisles. We boys preferred the back rows and sat there whenever we could.

The program was always the same. We would start with a hymn followed by a prayer. Then there would be some announcements and then another hymn. After this 'Mr Ack' as we all called him, would lead us in a long intercession. Then there would be another hymn, an offering and classes.

Mr Ack had a repertoire of about ten hymns which he would rotate week by week. One of his favourites was, 'Thou didst leave Thy throne' with its lovely refrain 'Oh come to my heart Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for Thee.'

Another was -

Who is He in yonder stall?
At Whose feet the shepherds fall?

Then came the chorus -

Tis the Lord,
O wondrous story
Tis the Lord
The King of Glory
At His feet we humbly fall
Crown Him, crown Him
Lord of all.

It was a great Christmas hymn, but it seemed to us that we sang it at least once a month throughout the year. We boys used to love the word 'humbly.' We looked forward to it, bright with anticipation. Although we hardly sang any of the rest of the song, we all joined in enthusiastically on that word. We placed a long, strong emphasis on the first syllable - 'HUM- bly' the letter 'm' resonating on our mouths.

The organist was literally a little old lady—a diminutive white-haired soul whom we only knew as ‘Miss Tilly.’ She lived in a large rambling house with a wild unkempt garden a few doors along the suburban street in which our modest church building stood. She came regularly every week and pumped away at the primitive pedal organ. There were no other instruments; the age of guitars had not yet come and there was no piano in the church sanctuary.

I cannot remember her ever talking to any one or ever coming to any other function of the church. But she was always there for Sunday school. In winter, she would wear old fashioned white long-legged pantaloons and we would peer with delight at the lace frills beneath her modest skirts, just over the tops of her shoes. For a group of boys, she was a fascination. If the rumours were true, she died some years later of malnutrition, the result of failing to look after herself properly in her old age.

But the thing about those hymns is that, although no children’s workers in their right mind would even contemplate using them in Sunday School today, with their Elizabethan English and their dreary organ accompaniment, the lyrics and the sound biblical doctrine they contain, are firmly bedded in my mind still today, over fifty years later. I still know many of them verbatim.

When Mr Ack prayed, it was always the same. He had a deep sonorous voice, that rang out with ecclesiastical tones and he used identical phrases week in and week out. I can still hear him interceding for the ‘great, world-wide missionary enterprise.’ I had no idea what this was, but it always sounded impressive! Today, I am glad he prayed that way.

Every year we had Sunday School examinations. Only a few children volunteered for these, but I was one. My older sister had regularly topped the State and I guess there was some pressure on me to follow her example. These were sometimes held in his home, where his wife, a kindly, smiling buxom woman always made us welcome. For some reason, she was never seen at church. I had no idea why.

Of course, anniversary time was always a special event. A man whose name I have long since forgotten used to come from a neighbouring church and, patiently waving his little conductor’s baton, teach us the songs we were to sing. We would practise for about two months beforehand. For the occasion a tiered wooden platform would be erected above the pulpit and choir stalls, obliterating the golden mural text which every other Sunday reminded us that ‘They that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength.’

For two Sundays, three services a day, we sang our songs to the crowded church as members, adherents and parents flocked to fill the seats. Although the boys as a group did not show much enthusiasm for singing, after I turned to the Lord at the age of ten, I joined in with zeal. I am not sure it improved the overall performance.

It was usually spring time, and the aroma of the flowers that decorated the church always struck me, although as a boy I would never admit it. On these occasions, Mr Ack would take a back seat, except perhaps to give the ‘intimations’ of the ensuing services.

Then came the Tuesday night prize-giving. I still recall a wonderful little book of Greek legends I received one year. It was hardly a spiritual volume, but it did introduce me to another magical world and another culture which has had more than its share of influence on Western society today. And as I read those mythical tales of nymphs and shepherds, gods and goddesses, heroes and warriors, my imagination was stirred to dream of great exploits myself.

Mr Ack also used to run the boys club. We met in the back hall on Monday nights where we tumbled on straw filled mats, bounced off a heavy wooden springboard onto a rickety wooden horse and swung on parallel bars smoothed to a dark shine over the years by hundreds of sweaty hands. How we never suffered injury is a matter for wonder. Sometimes we played indoor cricket or joined in team games with great, heavy misshapen medicine balls. Mr Ack never participated. He wore the same suit on Monday nights he wore on Sundays. But he was always there, keeping an eye on things.

He wasn't the sort of man you could talk to. I can't remember ever having a one-to-one conversation with him. But I guess, looking back, he must have had a love for children, especially boys, that motivated him to do what he did. I for one remember with gratitude the input he had into my life.

Somehow, although to the modern eye he used all the wrong methods, the Spirit of God made good work of it anyway. So thanks, Mr Ack, for being the Lord's instrument in the life of a small boy who received more than he knew at the time and perhaps more than he ever will know this side of heaven.

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About Dr Barry Chant

Barry Chant is Senior Pastor of the Wesley International Congregation in Sydney, Australia. He is a regular speaker at church services, seminars, conferences and conventions. Hundreds of thousands of his books have been sold around the world. He has degrees in arts, theology and ministry, a diploma in education and a PhD in history. He was the initiator and former president of Tabor College, Australia.

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