

Gainford School and the Parish Church of St Mary, Gainford: 2017 – 2018

Background

I am glad to report of our ever developing close and healthy relationship. Looking back on the Easter and Summer terms of 2017, we planted and nourished the seeds we wished to sow in our children at Gainford School. This year we have nurtured the ground further and reaped the fruit. The *Talking Jesus* mission weekend introduced a fresh excitement about faith and the Christian's journey. *Talking Jesus* presented the prospect of a personal and living Christian experience not one in which stories of the Bible remain in the distant past and within the covers of an ancient book called 'the Bible'. Our newly appointed Headteacher Chris Riley was keen that we review how the Christianity part of the RE curriculum could be more appealing to the children, particularly as it does not have the novelty of unfamiliarity and exotic features that come with other religions on the curriculum. We decided to build on what the children began to appreciate from their *Talking Jesus* projects to address this need.

From *Talking Jesus* to *Talking to God* and *Talking with Jesus*

We embarked on the method of 'Prayer Spaces', where each term would culminate in the installing of the children's prayer spaces inside the church for all the community to share.

In October the children began to create Prayer Spaces. They began with the foundational concept of Heaven and Earth, for the passing of life from earth to an eternal place beyond earthly knowledge. They created 2 prayer spaces for All Souls and All Saints to reflect the vast mystery of faith and the Christian's belief ('Where Heaven and Earth Meet') and to reflect personal loss ('The Empty Chair'). The school developed on this with the painting of Remembrance stones to commemorate the fallen at war displayed at Remembrance Day and the Remembrance Service.

In the season of Advent, in anticipation of Christmas, through to the Epiphany, the children reflected on the Gainford Star and the notion of 'Wish upon a Star'. They built a prayer space to pray for and bless those in need both near and afar – that each wish became a prayer. They donated good toys that they had enjoyed but outgrown to children of families in need in the North East. They also created a prayer space that invited everyone to 'Follow the Star' – a way of learning about the nativity story, and following the infant Jesus' story, in a fresh way.

From *Talking with Jesus* to *Being with Jesus*

There was a natural progression from following the Holy Family and the infant Jesus to being with Jesus.

From Lent to Easter, the children embarked on the journey with Jesus to the Cross and Resurrection. Each Class focused on a few aspects of the journey from Palm Sunday (Reception; Years 1-2); the Last Supper; the Easter Garden (Years 3-4), and the Crucifixion and Resurrection (Years 5-6). Some imagined themselves as the disciples or as watchers unnamed in the Passion scenes. These involved a lot of creative work; story telling; creative writing to put themselves in Jesus' company in his last days; and prayer spaces using the Cross.

After the Easter break, the children have been invited to be part of creating their first outdoor prayer space in the form of Gainford's first Labyrinth on the Green. Using a craft they had already successfully adopted for Remembrance of painted stones, they would paint stones to reflect their personal milestones (happiest, most memorable, most difficult, etc, moments) as well as Jesus' memorable moments as depicted by his life reported in the Gospels. Their stones will form most of the labyrinth path, and they will invite the whole community to walk the labyrinth in their own time to reflect on their own life and their memorable milestones.

This outdoor prayer space will also be used to introduce Ascension and the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Bishop of Durham will begin his Prayer Walk through Barnard Castle Deanery (most of Teesdale) at the school and visit the labyrinth on Ascension Day.

Also during the Summer Term, the church and school have formed an Open The Book team who attended training in the Diocese to introduce Bible stories in a new and lively way. A curriculum of stories has been agreed with headteacher Chris and her team and this OTB team will deliver stories both in Class assemblies and whole school Collective Worship.

School Services in Church

St Mary's Parish Church, with the active participation of the Vicar, Curate, Foundation Governor, and other officers of the church, continues to welcome the school for termly, commemorative, and festival services. Families continue to be invited to join the school at most of these services. In addition, we encourage the school's participation in the special service for Year 6 Leavers in Durham Cathedral, which supplements the School Leavers' Service at our church at the end of the school year.

Looking Ahead

2017-18 can be summed up as a year of shared endeavour where we have embarked on fresh approaches with pleasing evidence of deepened spirituality in children and for those who teach and assist them, and growing understanding of the Christian faith. With the progressive, reliable, and proactive leadership of Headteacher Chris Riley, there is every prospect of the church and school reaping more desired benefits in the years to come for our children, their families, and the parish of Gainford.

Rev'd Eileen Harrop
Vicar, Gainford
Governor, Gainford C of E Primary School
May 2018