

Suffer Little Children

David Gibbs

(Article from *A Miscellany of Merriott Memories*)

Back in the war years, the village had a population that could scarcely have topped a thousand souls, yet to meet their spiritual needs there was not only the parish church but also four chapels. All of these places of worship were quite different, each supported by people who somehow fitted into clearly defined groups. You either went up Church, down Congregational, out Four Square, up Gospel Hall or down Wesleyan - pronounced locally as 'Wesleen'.

For most of my young days, I went down Wesleen. It started with my baptism when I was just a few months old and ended when I was about eleven or twelve with a weekly fib to my mother declaring that I had been to Sunday school when all the time I'd been playing truant.

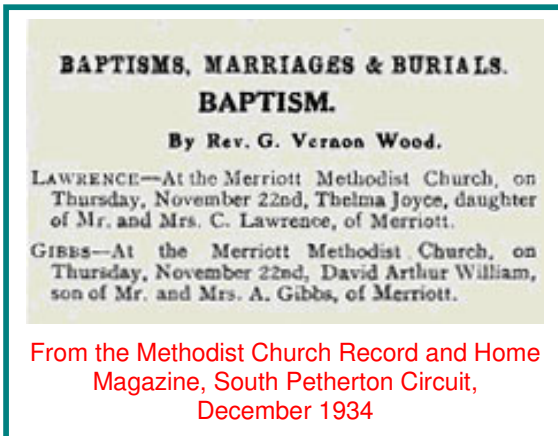
Sunday school was held in the schoolroom at the back of the chapel, under the jurisdiction of the School Superintendent, a kindly man called Mr Arthur Lawrence.

Mr Lawrence always started by calling the register, an essential procedure as the attendance recorded was eventually used to determine the value of prizes awarded at the Christmas party and the eligibility or otherwise of an individual to attend the annual Sunday-school treat in the summer.

Formalities over, we sang an opening hymn, accompanied by my cousin Geraldine playing the treadle organ. *'There's a home for little chil-dren, above the bri-ight blue sky'* was one hymn of which I remember being particularly fond. Could it be a Dr. Barnardo's home, I wondered? We heard a lot about Dr. Barnardo's Homes back in those days.

After the hymn, we had bible lessons. There were three classes: boys, girls and infants. Mr Lawrence took the boys, Mrs Beer the girls and my Aunt Lot, Geraldine's mother, took the infants. The infants always sat in a corner next to the Slow-But-Sure 'Tortoise' stove that, in winter, glowed red-hot and filled the room with coke fumes.

The learning consisted of little more than each individual reading in turn from a passage in the bible. Boredom soon settled in. *'Can we play texts now, Mr Lawrence?'* we asked. *'No, not yet,'* he would at first say, but after a little more reading and a lot more pleading he would soon capitulate.



Playing texts was great fun and if you paid attention during the bible reading that could pay dividends. But you needed sharp eyesight. Mr Lawrence would nominate a boy to start the game off, usually the one who had put a bit of effort in when it was his turn to read. The envied individual would then search the passage for the most obscure text he could find and announce his choice - *'God so loved,'* for example. The rest of the group would then frantically scan the passage for the words. When found, the finder would shout out the location. *'Verse 16!'* And then, if the response was correct, it was then his turn to choose a text.

Playing texts would go on for quite some while until it was time for Mr Lawrence to issue real texts - little squares of card on which there was a picture of flowers or birds and an accompanying biblical quotation. The intention was for these little cards to be kept in the correct place in a bible. I didn't have a bible so mine were usually filed deep in a trouser pocket, there to stay until retrieved by my mother on washday.

On one occasion, I was given a card that bore the text *'Suffer little children to come unto Me'*. The words bothered me a bit. I couldn't understand why little children had to suffer before they could go to see Jesus.

Before the class ended, all the school sang another hymn. Then Mr Lawrence said a closing prayer and we children, hands clasped tight, smirking at each other through supposedly closed eyes, mumbled *'Our Father, which art in Heaven, hullo Beehive Lane.....'* Then it was all over. Mr Lawrence, Mrs Beer and Aunt Lot, duty done for another week, hurried off home to the Sunday newspapers and we were free again.

Occasionally, the weekly routine would be broken, such as for the special Anniversary Service or the Harvest Festival. On these occasions we joined the grown-ups in the main chapel where a pronouncement, painted in a large arc of ornate brown lettering that spanned the altar wall, implored us to *WORSHIP THE LORD IN THE BEAUTY OF HOLINESS*.

The Anniversary Service was a very tiresome affair for children, particularly because for several weeks before the big day we were required to practise singing a series of new, tuneless hymns. The special service itself might have been equally tiresome, but we kids, herded together in the side pews, had ways of lightening the proceedings. We had a great time poking fun at the antics of our elders, and in particular at the lay preachers.

There was one gentleman whose enthusiasm for the word of God was not matched by his ability to proclaim it. Consequently, within a prayer, he constantly punctuated his delivery with *'O Heavenly Father'* in order to give his thoughts chance to catch up with his vocal chords; it was *'O Heavenly Father this'* and *'O Heavenly Father that'* ad infinitum. We would sit there, heads well down behind the back of the pew in front, taking cover like soldiers in the trenches, and count the *'O Heavenly Fathers'*, giggling at each other as the number steadily mounted.

But the Harvest Festival, now that was something quite different! Is there a country child of yesterday, regardless of religious denomination, who does not have fond memories of a village church or chapel Harvest Festival? What magic there was, what sights, what smells! What super hymns! They used to plough the fields and scatter the

good seed on the land with great success around Merriott. It was an area noted for its horticultural expertise. The growers were often hawkers too, and practically every morning at least one horse-drawn cart, loaded with locally grown produce, would set off to serve a distant round. But even those not commercially involved took great pride in their allotments and gardens and the products of their labours. The Harvest Festivals provided the opportunity to show off a little bit. There would even be talk amongst we kids about which church or chapel had the best display of produce and flowers. Some children were quite boastful but, of course, not we Wesleyan children,. There was absolutely no need for us to boast, no need at all, because we had Savoy cabbages so big they had to be cradled in enfolding arms before they could be lifted; Bramley apples the size of hands; dahlias larger than dinner plates; carrots longer than a sun-burnt arm and vegetable marrows the size of sleeping dogs! *'Cut my throat if I tell a lie,'* we used to say.

At the centre of the display would be the traditional harvest loaf in the form of a sheaf of corn, baked by Mr Foard in the village bakery. And somewhere in the display would be a bunch of grapes, grown locally by Mr Slade in his Merriottsford conservatory.

In the Sunday school room the following Thursday evening, the grapes and all the other produce were auctioned. This was a joyous occasion conducted with much humour as petty rivalries were fought out in halfpenny increments as one person tried to outbid another. But there were bargains galore, except for the grapes.

The auctioning of the grapes was the highlight of the evening. They were, during the war years, a luxury. Bidding would be brisk at first, and then, reasonable values abandoned, it would settle down to a duel between the usual two people. The bidding would stop at around fifteen shillings for the single bunch. Gasps all round, clapping even. And no wonder, to pay fifteen shillings when a man's weekly wage was less than five pounds seems, in retrospect, rather silly. But that aside, at the time we saw it as wonderful entertainment.

There was another occasion when the schoolroom was full of laughter and excitement. This was at the time of the Sunday School Christmas party. The trestle tables that held the harvest offerings came out again, this time to be covered in white tablecloths and then loaded with dishes of custard and blancmange, plates of jam tarts and mince pies, and mountains of meat-paste sandwiches. And there was Aunt Lot, Mrs Beer and other helpers recruited for the occasion, appearing like apparitions out of the clouds of steam surrounding the tea urn, rushing around with big brown teapots filling up endless cups with milky tea. When the tea party was over, there was the prize giving that, for a while at least, made the enforced attendance at Sunday school seem not such a bad thing after all. The prize was usually a book, a publication of The Missionary Society.

After prizes, there were games to play, like pass-the-parcel and musical chairs. A particular favourite with boisterous boys was *'a-hunting-we-will-go'* in which we formed two facing rows. The two people at the head of each row held each other as though about to waltz, but instead did a side-step charge up and down between the two rows of people as everyone sang and clapped in unison:

*A-hunting we will go, a-hunting we will go,
We'll catch a fox,
Put him in a box,
And never let him go!*

I can't quite remember the full sequence of movements but at the end of each chorus the charging pair ended up at the opposite end of the rows to the one from which they set out, and the next pair went a-hunting. I don't suppose all that threatened cruelty to foxes would be allowed nowadays.

Right at the very end of the evening, there was the birthday song.

*All those who were born in January,
Stand up! Stand up!*

began the chorus, and all those with birthdays that month stood up.

*And all together we will sing,
Our praises to our Lord and King!*

the chorus continued. Then off it went again, repeating for each month of the year. We all knew each other's birthdays, so we knew who would be next to stand. I was born in September; the suspense of waiting so long before I could stand was almost too much.

When everyone in the hall was standing, Mr Lawrence would stand at the front and say a prayer of thanks for all the good things we had enjoyed. Then we filed outside into the cold of a winter night that, in my memory, was always starlit and bathed in moonbeams.

I suppose it was inevitable that in a changing world the village, despite a greatly increased population, could not continue to support so many religious establishments. Now the Wesleyan Chapel is no more; the building has been converted into a private residence. What on earth would Mr Lawrence, Mrs Beer and Aunt Lot make of that, I wonder?

2011 Update

Since writing that article about 30 years ago, the wonderful internet has arrived. Out of interest, I casually made a search for the *A-Hunting We Will Go* song, and there it was! If you recall that song, you may like to visit the sites below, preferably in the order listed.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9FDBnOVhXs>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gK_giFt51IQ&NR=1

<http://kristinhall.org/songbook/MakeEmUp/AHuntingWeWillGo.html>