

# Easter at St Ita's

Lisa Bridle

The primary school which my children attend has a tradition of staging an annual Easter pageant. This year will be my son Sean's final pageant as next year he will be moving on to the new adventure of high school. What a delight then that he was chosen for the very important role of the risen Jesus in the story of the Easter folktale "The Three Trees". For a link to the story go to: <http://www.word4life.com/threetrees.html>

Of course, as parents we all appreciate the times our children get a chance to "shine" and are recognised (not just by us!) as being talented, conscientious and capable. It is also not necessarily our usual experience with Sean – not through any deliberate oversight – but because sometimes with our children with disability the "talents" are not as visible and it takes a greater leap of faith on the part of teachers and others to believe they will rise to the challenge. It can be more common for a child with disability to be relegated to the back row (out of harm's way) rather than centre-stage.

When, with some surprise, I thanked Sean's teacher for supporting Sean in this role, he informed me that Sean was unanimously nominated for the part by his classmates. So this made our excitement about Sean's important role, even greater.



Sean took this role very seriously and was determined to do his very best. He concentrated very hard to keep up with the moves he had practised. He had great support from his classmates who prompted him (very discreetly) at key transition points and from his teacher who sat in front of the stage providing him with a reminder of the actions he needed to incorporate. His enormous grin at the end of the show was priceless. Terry and I were so very proud of him and many others were too. A number of teachers and many, many parents explained how they had been moved to tears. One parent wrote to the school and this short message appeared on the front page of the school newsletter.

***[This celebration] was a true testimony to the commitment St Ita's has to bearing witness to our faith and Catholic traditions through community gatherings such as these. This is the true essence of our Catholic schooling and it was so affirming to see***

***this in our children's faces and through their collective voices. And what a joy to see young Sean so focused, so committed in the final scene where he portrayed the risen Christ – Well done Sean!***

Over the weeks since the pageant as I continue to be approached by other parents, many of whom I have never met before, I have pondered the meaning of this spontaneous outpouring of appreciation and the emotions which Sean's performance stirred. As Sean's parents, we can explain our own tears as simple pride, mixed always with an understanding of all the obstacles and challenges Sean has faced along the way. But I am curious about why others too describe feeling so "moved".

There is no simple explanation that fits all but it seems that we are "moved" by the "rightness" of this – by the simple and ordinary act of Sean being there alongside every other child and of having one's gifts recognised and celebrated in such a significant community event. It is the ordinariness of something unfortunately not always so ordinary for people with disability. Of course, while we as parents have lived the challenges, the setbacks and the rejections, I guess others have a sense too of these and the extra efforts Sean must put in every day to navigate a world which is complex and demanding for all of us, but particularly so when one lives with intellectual disability. So it is wonderful when others join us as a "cheer squad" ... wishing Sean every success. People were undoubtedly moved by Sean's determination to do his best and by the wonderful support he was given by his teachers and classmates.

Mostly though, I believe others are moved by Sean's performance as a reminder of the gift of community. Sean has undoubtedly benefitted by being welcomed and valued in this community – but I also dare to believe that the community has been made stronger through Sean's presence. It is a community in which we have frequent reminders that all are welcomed but also that we all need each other to "shine". It is in such a community that we know that we are perfect in the eyes of God and yet also thoroughly broken, vulnerable and in need of healing. The experience of disability reminds us all that we can cover up our limitations and brokenness with bravado and artifice, but God is not fooled.

Not long ago, the very thought of a person with disability representing Jesus would have been considered by many not just audacious, but blasphemous. How right though that Sean would have played the Risen Christ – a symbol of hope and promise rather than suffering and sacrifice (concepts more readily associated with disability). This year as we look forward – with some anxiety and grief – to leaving this small and welcoming community for the adventure of high school, we cling to this message of hope and God's promises. And to the message of the Three Trees story itself which reminds us that though we will face fear, hardships and disappointments, that God's plans for us are often much "bigger" and more significant than the more conventional rewards and lives we would have chosen for ourselves.