

Sermon
Septuagesima

February 5th, 2012

St John's, Notting Hill

Fr Richard Peers SCP

As a student teacher I was inspired, and continue to be inspired by a book by Postman and Weingartner called Teaching as A Subversive Activity. Among many other elements that have informed my career as a teacher, school chaplain, deputy head, inspector of schools and now headteacher was their claim that education should train everyone to develop an inner 'crap detector'. It's only recently that I discovered that the phrase was originated by Ernest Hemingway in 1954. Well I was using my inner crap detector rather heavily this week as I read Alan de Botton's latest book 'Religion for Atheists', if you haven't read it you may have seen some of the rather extensive reviewing of it. As always for de Botton it is beautifully written, elegant and completely charming. But I have to say that from the very first sentence to the last Hemingway's detector would be sounding its alarm.

So here is his first sentence (or at least part of it): "The most boring

and unproductive question one can ask of any religion is whether or not it is true.”

We are fortunate as a church in having inherited a large stock of church schools 4,600 primaries, 220 secondaries between them educating one fifth of the children of England. They are generally among the most successful schools in the country and are hugely oversubscribed.

Truth, has to be at the heart of what we do in our schools and why we do it. If the Christian gospel is not true it would be simply wrong to be engaged in education in the way we are. And it is truth that stands out so profoundly from the readings we have just heard and which should rise as a challenge to all involved in church schools on this Education Sunday. “Woe betide me” St Paul says, “if I do not proclaim the Gospel.” In the first reading Isaiah could almost be talking to some of those children who have left church schools over the last three or four decades “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” and in today’s Gospel Jesus is unequivocal that proclaiming the message “is what I came to do”.

In the two years in which I inspected church schools I saw numerous mission statements, values policies and ethos documents that made no mention of Christian truth, in which the name of Jesus Christ never appeared and which instead were saturated with the most saccharine platitudes imaginable in which the supposed Christian ethos consisted in no more than good manners, kindness and a willingness to be a team player.

Fortunately the tide has at last turned and all over the country schools are beginning to say that what we do is based not on values or ethos

but on doctrine and truth. Based on an understanding of the world and our place in it that has been revealed to us in the person of Jesus who saves us from the fallen-ness that is so obviously around us.

Church schools are becoming subversive, counter cultural institutions which offer a counter cultural view of the world, an alternative to the multicultural *mélange*, the nihilistic despair and the post modern relativism which has dominated public debate for too long.

Let me be a little more specific. At the teacher training college I attended (originally a Church of England foundation) the phrase that encapsulated the philosophy of education taught was so dominant that it appeared in large letters above the principal lecture hall. Two simple words. “Child centred”. I suspect they originate in the ‘person-centred’ school of counseling led by Carl Rogers. The result of this thinking is that children are in charge, that adults forget how to be adults and the outworking of it was the way I was taught to organize my Primary classroom, the ‘integrated day’ perhaps better described as the disintegrated day. The classroom was set up with activity areas and children were free to choose when and for how long if at all they did number work, reading and writing, painting or so on. When they wrote they were free to make any scribble or shape they liked on paper, to tell us what it said – even when it clearly didn’t – and I as teacher wrote a response.

Now it’s very easy to caricature this style of teaching. But I do believe it is profoundly mistaken. For some years I moved to what I called a ‘human centred’ approach to education, centred not on the children our pupils are but on the adults they would become and we wanted them to be. Now I go even further and suggest that the only truly Christian education has to be profoundly God centred.

Having worked for almost all of my adult life in areas of urban deprivation and social decay I am more and more convinced of the need to simply teach children Christian truth.

Human life is simply too short to apply a discovery learning method to finding meaning in life. Even, perhaps particularly, in the area of personal and sexual ethics if we allow young people to find out for themselves that, for instance infidelity generally leads to misery and unhappiness when we already know that to be the case we are simply selling them short.

Most teachers are in teaching because we want to 'make a difference'. I hope that the way we run our school in Lewisham will subvert cycles of poverty and family breakdown and will allow our children to flourish and prosper.

Three and a half years ago the school put in the category 'notice to improve', pupil attendance was only about 92% and only a quarter of pupils left the school with the most basic of qualifications.

We changed the school by making it a profoundly Christian, and specifically Church of England community.

From the very first we have begun each day with Christian worship, reading from the Bible, lighting a candle and singing a hymn or song. The Eucharist is celebrated daily in school and regularly for the whole school, the house groups and form groups.

We began with a simple question: What is God like? The answer is not arrived at by discussion or brainstorming but is to be found in Christian dogma. God is Trinity, a communion of persons. From there we said 'If God is like that how should our school be?'

In three years results have trebled, attendance is now among the highest in London, a year and a half into the process we were judged to be a good school with outstanding spiritual, moral, social and cultural education and just last week we were visited by Ofsted again and judged outstanding. Children who arrive at the school between 8-10% below national averages leave with 10-15% above.

Outcomes for children have been improved by being wholly and unapologetically ourselves. And this should be no surprise. Teenagers are involved in the lifelong task of deciding who they are; all of us who work with people at this stage in their lives know that they adopt and reject identities with alarming frequency. They are experimenting with style and language and meaning. They question accepted truth and they demand justice and fairness.

Contrary to what has been popular opinion the best environment for this is not a blank space but a strong culture which is unafraid of its own identity, which is unapologetic and confident.

One of the interesting things for us is how much people of all faiths like what we are doing. We host an Islamic school on Saturdays provide a prayer room (and a prayer tent on residential) for our Muslim students.

Our current concern is the content of Religious Education. For decades RE has been dominated by a multi faith agenda which places religions alongside one another for comparison. Agonisingly artificial themes are selected to find points to compare and contrast. I believe that no religion benefits from this. Why shouldn't we go back to teaching theology and Scripture with an integrity all of its

own. Adding some philosophy so that children are taught how to think.

The motto we use at Trinity is *Deus pulchritudinis*, through music, art, liturgy, learning, travel and the pursuit of truth we hope that our children will meet the God who is beauty, who cannot be captured in an Alan de Botton temple of Atheism and who reveals himself to us in Jesus.

These are interesting times in education, times when those three key messages from the readings we have just heard can challenge all of us who work in schools to 'proclaim the message' and to ask ourselves what the children leaving our schools would answer to the questions: Have you not known? Have you not heard?