

AGBIS
11th March 2020
The Value and Values of Independent Education
(Privilege and Responsibility)

Introduction

1. You've asked me to give you a 'Thought for the Day'. The Today Programme allows you 2 minutes 40 seconds. You've given me 40 minutes! That's 15 Thoughts for the Day!
2. 'May the best man win' story.
3. EasyJet Story.
4. First, let me thank you for all that you do as members of Governing Bodies. Few understand the nature of the commitment and the legal responsibility that you carry.
5. You may be wondering about my qualifications to speak about the value and values of Independent Education. I went to an independent school (Duke of York's Royal Military School). My father was in the army. Boarding school provided continuity through overseas postings in Singapore. It was a formative experience for 8 years.

I benefitted greatly during some difficult times from the pastoral care of the Chaplain and his wife not least in my last year when I became Head Boy. After graduating I taught at an Independent School (Sevenoaks) which was famous for its innovative approach to education. I found the four years teaching there to be an important part of my own education. We sent our three daughters to independent day schools in Bristol, Croydon, Hull and Liverpool. They had four schools in eight years and we valued the pastoral care the schools offered. Two of our daughters are teachers, one is Head of Little Wetherby, an independent school in London.

When I was bishop of Liverpool we built three City Academies which initially was the Government's attempt to provide a degree of independence within and from the State sector. (Refer to the Academy of St Francis of Assisi)

6. I personally value three things:
 - a) continuity through the disruption of career moves.
 - b) creativity of both the curriculum and the extra-curricular activity that was incorporated into the school day.
 - c) care, the pastoral care, that was prepared to recognise the individual needs of our children.

7. When I trained as a teacher for a PGCE I recall the distinction being drawn between instruction, training and education. Instruction was the imparting of knowledge, Training was the learning of skills and Education was about the formation of the person and their character. Over the last 25 years schooling has come under huge political scrutiny and pressure. In search for better examination results and higher places in the League Tables the curriculum has narrowed to focus on results - schooling is veering towards instruction and knowledge. Although Independent Education is by no means free from this pressure the way its schools were founded and are governed maintain the emphasis on the formation of character and the education of the whole person.

I often quote Graham Greene from his novel "The Power and the Glory". "There's always a moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in". It is the responsibility of the Governing Body to be the custodian of the ethos of the school, to be the door-keeper to those values that will be formative in the lives of those educated there, both pupils and staff.

8. If that is the value of Independent Education what precisely are the values? Fairness, Freedom, Dignity, Truth and the Imagination.

9. FAIRNESS.

Let me take the most difficult first. Fairness. We're all aware of the criticism levelled against the private and independent sector. It became a doorstep issue at the last election with threats to abolish independent education on the grounds that it contributed to the inequalities of our society. For some private education is an obstacle to a just society. The appeal to fairness is particularly effective amongst the young.

10. Quite recently I was invited to give out the prizes at a large and very successful Comprehensive school. In my speech I told the young people I was not there to tell them about God; nor was I there to tell them to follow their dreams or to be the best possible person they could be. I was there, I said, to urge them that as they went through life "Be Fair. And so make the world a fairer place." I was taken aback by the applause. Young people aspire to be fair and set their face against injustice. They're not perfect but they call out bullying and racism, they condemn discrimination and wrecking the planet. And even within independent schools you'll find some of your own students railing against their own school as a bastion of inequality and injustice.

11. Having served as bishop in Hull and then Liverpool. I understand the call for greater fairness in our society (*Tell the story of Stacey*). Having worked on the inquiry into the Hillsborough football disaster, I know the cruel impact of injustice and the passion for living in a more just world. So, I do not come lightly to this subject of fairness in education.

12. The education of a young person is never limited to that which goes on in the classroom. There are multiple extra-curricular factors that shape a child's future - parental influence, tutoring, sports coaching, music lessons, hobbies, cadet forces, drama clubs and various youth organisations including faith groups. The glory of independent education is that they can bring all these extracurricular activities together with the classroom under the one roof and into one community.

The only way to make education and schools anywhere near equal would be for the State to ban all these external activities, opportunities and influences . But to do so would be such an affront to Freedom and an assault on the liberty of individuals.

13. FREEDOM

Freedom is a virtue. It's a human right. It sits alongside fairness and justice. There are times when the principle of freedom overrules certain political mechanisms that seek to secure equality and fairness but fail to do so, such as abolishing all Independent Education. There is a fundamental human right that we should be free to choose what we believe and to believe what we choose. The freedom to speak and to teach what you believe is a fundamental and inalienable human right.

14. David Bromwich in "How Words make things happen" argues that "Free speech is an aberration" and adds "it is best to begin by admitting that". He shows how down the centuries freedom has always been circumscribed by either dictators or majority opinion and how even today our freedoms are circumscribed in such episodes as Charlie Hebdo. However persuasive nevertheless I would argue that the history of human progress is evidence that the quest for freedom is marbled into the human heart, no matter how much it is frustrated and thwarted. From a Christian perspective I trace that human right and aspiration to be free back to the disciples of Christ. They were ordered not to speak or to teach about the Resurrection of Christ. When the State ordered them to stay silent and tried to outlaw their beliefs their response was to defy the human authority by claiming a divine right to speak, to teach the truth.

15. Interestingly, the New Testament uses a significant word to describe their reaction. It says they went on to speak out “with boldness”. The word comes from the Classical Greek for “Freedom of Speech”.

In our society today there is huge pressure through the power of political correctness to limit that freedom. Universities themselves have become places where that right to speak your mind is hugely restricted. But surely a university should be a place, a community, where you learn not to outlaw but to outwit your opponent’s opinions. If that should be the benchmark of a university education it should also be the hallmark of an Independent Education.

16. DIGNITY

Freedom is essential to ensuring the dignity of the individual and to fostering the diversity of individuals within the community. Independent Schools are attracting more and more young people from different countries and cultures.

This, of course, can be fuel for detractors who want to prove that independent education simply services the needs of the global elite.

But that injection of diversity should be seen as a virtue of Independent Education. It helps equip our young people to live in harmony with their peers from different cultures.

It prepares them for life and work in a global world. That affirmation of diversity is guaranteed by the independent sector's commitment to freedom for all regardless of creed, colour or culture. Freedom is essential to 'the dignity of difference', a phrase coined by Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sachs.

17. TRUTH

One of the virtues of education rooted in faith, which is the history of education generally in this country, is the concept of Truth with a capital T. Yet today you will hear celebrities talk about 'my truth' as if truth were subjective and relative. But the Judeo-Christian tradition which has shaped our cultural landscape - our language, our literature, our laws, our liberty, our leisure, our learning and our landscape - has at its foundation an understanding of Truth with a Capital 'T'. Those who object to this conviction, who talk about "my truth" rather than "The Truth" will often protest "There is no such thing as absolute truth". But that is a contradiction in itself, for whoever says it believes it to be the Truth with a capital T.

It seems to me that Independent Education allows schools to resist the tide of relativism so prevalent in popular culture and hold fast to certain values as true, absolute and objective.

(Give the example of apartheid and Nelson Mandela).

Governing Bodies are custodians of the ethos, ethics and values of the school. They should have the confidence to assert them robustly by understanding their philosophical foundation.

18. Now, you've invited a bishop so please forgive me for developing this thought about Truth a little further. (Expand here on John Lennon/Beatles song, "All I want is the Truth. Just give me some truth"). In our quest for the Truth the New Testament makes a unique claim. Ultimately Truth is not a set of abstract principles. Truth is a person. When Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, "What is Truth?", the answer was staring back at him. God gave us in our search for the Truth not just a set of commandments but a True Human Being to show us how to live.

And this brings me to an important point for Governors. When we look back on our own schooling few of us can remember much of what we were told. But we remember (even for a lifetime) not what we were taught but who and how they taught us.

It's the character of the teacher not the content of the lesson that stays with us. And here's the point - Governors are often involved in the appointment of senior teachers and Head Teachers. It's a heavy responsibility. The character and personality are as important as the curriculum vitae!

19. IMAGINATION

I return to that comprehensive element of Independent Education that in the very best schools brings under the one roof the curriculum and the extracurricular. In the best schools these come together to develop the imagination of young students. And it is the development of the imagination that is key to the creating of a compassionate and civilised society. If we are not able imaginatively to put ourselves into the shoes of others how will we ever engage with those so different from ourselves. It is through the arts, sports and clubs that a young imagination is developed.

20. (Tell the Chinese Fable of the barren couple offered the gift of a child.)

21. Of course, I'm not suggesting that these values do not exist within the State sector. They do. And especially they can be found in many faith schools (Jewish, Christian and Muslim) in the State sector. But what I am saying to you as members of Governing Bodies is that you have a right to educate children independently of the State and that there is a moral foundation to the values that you encourage your young people to embrace.

Independent Education at its best with its bifocal emphasis on both the curriculum and the extracurricular seeks to educate the whole person so as to exercise a civilising influence in a global world.

But please allow me a post script about privilege.

The word 'privilege' comes from the Latin meaning a law written for an individual. I suppose in modern parlance you would say 'a law unto themselves'.

But I'd like to offer a slant on this word.

There's no doubt that Independent Education is a privilege both in terms of separating itself from the State and of offering particular benefits to a minority. But it is up to Independent Educators to define what that privilege is, what the particular law and ethos are.

I find myself on your behalf reaching for words of Jesus who said, “From everyone to whom much is given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted even more will be demanded.” (Luke 12;48).

These words have been echoed by privileged people such as JF Kennedy and Bill Gates.

In 1961 in his famous ‘City upon a Hill’ speech JFK echoed these Biblical words and extolled the virtues of courage, judgement, integrity and dedication. In this way he believed we could fulfill our responsibility to the State.

Then in 2007 Bill Gates told an audience at Harvard (his Alma Mater) that it was his own mother who pressed him constantly to do more for others. Just before his wedding his mother who was dying of cancer wrote to Melinda ending the letter with the words, “From those to whom much is given, much is expected.” In other words for Kennedy and Bill and Melinda Gates, privilege brings with it the law of responsibility.

Amen to that, it could be the motto of Independent Education – ‘Privilege and Responsibility’ or, if you prefer it in Latin, ‘Privilegium et Obligatus’!

2350 words

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