

ANGLICAN SECONDARY HEADS

'DIGNITY'

9th October 2019

“The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him. Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends.

When they did not find him they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” But they did not understand what he said to them.

Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.”

Luke 2:⁴⁰⁻⁵²

God revealed himself first as a young person. In doing so he sanctified adolescence. Jesus, as a young person was fully human and fully divine. He was not on probation to become the Son of God; he was the Son of God as an adolescent. If there were such a saint this passage would be grounds for canonizing Jesus as the Patron Saint of Adolescence!

St Luke gives us a unique insight into his adolescence in Luke 2 ⁴⁰⁻⁵². The narrative is prefaced with:

2 ⁴⁰ “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him”

And ends with:

2 ⁵² “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour”

These two verses together speak of his physical, spiritual, intellectual, emotional and social development. As with every other child and adolescent Jesus grew through stages.

The word Luke chose for 'grew' originally meant 'to make one's way forward by chopping away obstacles'! If human growth is about encountering and negotiating a series of crises throughout our lives then Jesus was no exception as he shared fully in our humanity from the womb to the tomb! In adolescence he experienced the tensions common to all teenagers not least in his relationship with his parents and in the bond he formed with his teachers.

Luke gives us a picture of a 12 year old beginning to flex his intellectual muscles and to assert his own independence from his parents. Just the sort of character that Head Teachers of Secondary Schools encounter every day! Including the way Jesus answers back! Luke paints a portrait of the adolescent Jesus spreading his wings.

In Graham Green's novel 'The Power and the Glory' he writes 'There's always a moment in childhood when the door opens and let's the future in'. I think this may have been such a moment for Jesus as he wrestled in debate with the Temple teachers and began to grasp his origin and his destiny and his identity.

But there's an aspect of the exchanges between Jesus and his mother which I think connects directly with the theme of your conference 'Dignity'.

When Mary chides Jesus for causing his parents so much anxiety (a familiar theme, Headteachers?) he parries her question with a question (a familiar pattern, Headteachers?) and asks “Why were you searching for me?” You can imagine all the supplementaries ‘Am I not old enough? Do you not trust me? Am I not allowed a bit of freedom?’ But it’s the second question that is so revealing. It’s variously translated as “Did you not know I must be in my father’s house?” Or “Did you not know I must be about my father’s business?” Yet in the original Greek there’s no mention of either ‘house’ or ‘business’. The literal translation is very different. ‘Did you not know that in the things of my father it is necessary to be me?’ That is very different. It speaks of Jesus’ personhood, his identity and his dignity.

Now I’m not a classicist but I’ve read enough of the commentaries and articles to find there are many ‘interpretations’ of this verse. But I want to hold before us the literal translation for I believe it provides a foundation for a Christian understanding of identity and dignity, especially as it applies to adolescents.

“Did you not know that in the things of my father it is necessary to be me?” In other words, ‘what I do belongs to who and what I am’ or ‘this is me, I must be true to my emerging self’ or ‘you must respect me for who I am’.

When young people assert themselves in this way they are nearer to Christ than they realise.

Interestingly, this phrase 'it is necessary' or 'it behoves' is used by Jesus 14 times in the Gospel of Luke from 'It is necessary for the Son of Man to suffer (9²²) to 'It is necessary for you to do and not overlook the justice and the love of God' (Luke 11;42). The phrase speaks of the spiritual and moral imperatives by which Jesus lived his life. And it is the framework of these spiritual and moral imperatives that shape our formation of young people and within which they too are to find their own dignity.

Last year I was invited to give the prizes at a secondary school and began my speech by saying "I'm not here to tell you about God.

I'm not here to tell you to follow your dreams.

I'm not here to tell you to become the best possible person you can be.

I'm here to tell you something that might not make you famous, rich or even popular.

I'm here with one simple message -

As you go through life be fair

And so make the world a fairer place."

To be honest, I was taken aback by the hugely positive response from these young people.

As Jesus said 'It is necessary to do and not to overlook the justice and the love of God.' It is only in a fair and forgiving world that people can find and express their identity and dignity. Christian communities like Church Secondary Schools are called to be just and compassionate because they are founded upon the ethics of our Lord who said,

'It is necessary (or, it behoves us) to do and not overlook justice and the love of God.'

I'm not the only person to believe that we are governed by instincts. But not just for sex and survival. There's a spiritual instinct, a social instinct and a moral instinct. These three instincts manifest themselves episodically in adolescence. It is our calling as educators to help young people to examine and reflect upon their basic human instincts. The spiritual instinct — what is the origin and destiny of life? The social instinct - how do we conduct ourselves in our need to love and be loved? The moral instinct - from where do we receive our sense of right and wrong? Is it nature or nurture? Is it absolute or relative? It is our calling as Christian educators to introduce to these instinctual quests the example, the ethos and the ethics of Jesus Christ. And it is in the taking seriously of the questions of young people that we affirm their dignity in the same way that the Temple teachers took seriously the questions of a 12 year old adolescent from Nazareth.

I have little sympathy with those who say we live in a secular, post-Christian society. We certainly live in a world where people are losing interest in a religion that 2000 years on still cannot find a way to share a piece of bread with each other, in a religion that is still arguing about sexuality, in a religion that seems more pre-occupied with its own survival than with the survival of the planet. But none of this proves society is post-Christian. My own experience of young people shows that they are alert to the imperative to be fair, they are offended by bullying and racism, they are passionate about caring for the earth, they are infuriated by injustice and long to be heard in the corridors of power. When you read the Bible you discover that these their priorities are all the themes of our Christian faith. A Christian school is one that follows the example of the Temple teachers who gave the adolescent from Nazareth the space and the leisure to ask his own questions and to find his own answers. In so doing they affirmed his identity and dignity.

This quest to live in a fairer world, this railing against injustice came through to me most powerfully when I was asked to chair the Hillsborough Independent Panel. Meeting constantly with the families I'm struck by how the cause of truth and justice has been handed down from generation to generation so that there are now young people who have taken up the banner for truth and justice.

At the 27th and final Hillsborough anniversary service at Anfield I was asked to give a brief address. I told the story of the widow who kept coming to an unjust judge pleading with him, 'Give me justice'. He wasn't interested in her, in God or in anybody else. I paused and with emphasis upon each word added 'BUT SHE WOULD NOT GIVE UP'. With that the crowd of 20,000 applauded and stood. On my way home that evening I mused in my thoughts to God how 20,000 people had cheered one of Jesus' stories some 2000 years later. It's this that makes me optimistic about the Christian faith. People are still motivated by these values. Of course, we're not perfect. There's a chasm between what we are and what we ought to be. But here again the Christian faith comes into its own as it bridges the divide with the unconditional offer of love and forgiveness.

Our understanding of the dignity of humanity stretches back to the opening chapter of Genesis and to the declaration that men and women have been made in the image of God. The meaning of this concept has been endlessly debated but, in summary, it signifies that we have the capacity to have a relationship with God, that we possess the faculties of reason and conscience, that we are empowered to be creative and that we have, as a part of nature, a responsibility for the well-being of creation. This speaks of the richness of the syllabus of a Christian education that takes seriously the dignity of humanity.

But Christian theology also recognises that the image of God has lost its shine in humanity. It is marred and dulled through sin and evil. Nevertheless that essential dignity is not compromised. The concept of the image of God paves the way for another important emblem namely the imitation of Christ. Christ is “the image of the invisible God” and running through the letters of the New Testament is the call to imitate Christ and in so doing to imitate God’s own character.

Thus to take seriously the dignity of humanity we as educators must be concerned with more than just instruction which is the imparting of knowledge and training and the learning of skills. Our calling is about formation, the shaping of character after the likeness of Christ.

When we look back on our own schooling few of us can remember much of what we were actually told. Most of us can recall how the teacher was toward us. The mark that is left upon us is the character of the teacher. Speaking personally it was the character of the Chaplain and his wife that left on me the most indelible of marks and contributed most significantly to my own formation.

Some years ago the Audit Commission brought out a report called ‘Misspent Youth’ examining how to restore young offenders who had gone off the rails.

It concluded that the most significant element in restoring a young offender was meeting an adult who believed in them. This is why pastoral care is such a priority in Christian education because it recognises that the positive relationship between teacher and student is vital to the learner's self-esteem and formation. It is also of immense value to raising aspirations. These things communicate to the students their worth in which they come to appreciate their own dignity.

I remember someone saying there were two models of teaching. The jug and the candle. The former sees the student as a jug, a receptacle into which you pour and cram as many facts as possible. The latter sees the learner as a candle that is lit and shines out in the darkness. The flame is passed from teacher to students who are inspired by the belief that the teacher has in them.

And so we return to the door through which we entered. The teacher recognises the worth and the dignity of the student, not least in the affirmation of a person's right to be whoever they find themselves to be in gender, colour or creed. Whatever grief a student gives a parent or a teacher they have a precedent in a twelve year old adolescent once saying:

'Did you not know that it is necessary to be me?'

The Rt Revd James Jones KBE

