

SERMON FOR EDUCATION SUNDAY | 10.09.17

So how was school for you? Did you enjoy it, hate it, find it challenging or unsettling? Was it a place for finding friends or a place of being rather lonely? How was school for you?

If, like for most of us, it was mix of those things, maybe these words ring true: *it was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness. It was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch on incredulity. It was the season of light; it was the season of darkness. It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...* familiar words from Charles Dickens' 'A Tale of Two Cities'.

As schools have returned this week, the newspapers have made us very aware of the huge disparity of opportunity our children have to cope with. At one level there is the smiling face of Prince George, entering Thomas' London Day School for the first time. His Headmaster is reported as saying: *School is all about enjoyment. We are going to try to make this a really happy time, safe and secure.* It was good to hear him declaring the ethos of the school to be a Christian one, with an emphasis on caring, sharing, giving - and consideration for others. Sadly all this comes with a £22k a year price tag.

On the other hand the parent of one of our Church children, wanting a Primary school place near his home in Rotherfield Street, has failed to get a place anywhere closer than the Caledonian Road. With no car, that is a really awkward journey. So he currently sits at home until his appeal comes through.

And in Bonda, Zimbabwe, it is harder still. Without what we give at Harvest, those children won't go to school either, not because they can't get to school but because they can't afford the new government fees.

We all know the impact that schools have on our lives, for better or for worse. How many older people in this Borough talk about the lack of opportunities in their school days, reflecting on what might have been if there had been more Grammar School places? Bright but poor children simply had no chance and many ended up finishing their education at 14.

Is it any wonder that, as competition for secondary school places, and there are higher and higher expectations at GCSE and A level, that we hear that 1:3 children nationally has some kind of private tutoring, particularly in core subjects like English, Maths and Science.

But of course this has to be paid for too so it is no wonder that it is well off families and – perhaps more surprisingly, those from ethnic minority backgrounds - who are making most use of home tutors. And so the gap widens yet again. It was good to read this week that the Sutton Trust, an educational charity, is again appealing for more school-based homework clubs to make sure those with less money are not left behind.

What is true in education in general, is also true in Church. So it is not inappropriate to ask on Education Sunday: what is the link between religious education and the health of our churches?

In the national Centre for Social Research annual survey the same question is posed each year: *Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion? If so, which?*

In 1983 31% replied ‘no religion’; in 2016 the figure was approaching three times that number at 53%. In the same period the numbers of those calling themselves CofE fell from 40% to 15% of the total, with a 2% drop in just the last two years.

These figures are, of course far more complex than the headline statistics. Apart from anything else, in the past people called themselves CofE just because they didn’t know what else to say.

But underlying these numbers three things stand out:

- 1. Religion decreases through the generations so that the older you are the more likely you are to be linked to a faith community.**
- 2. It is also true that believing parents do not necessarily have believing children.**
- 3. The CofE has suffered far more decline than the Roman Catholic Church which has largely remained static (although immigration has hugely inflated the numbers of worshipping Catholics).**

Commentators, trying to make sense of all this, have suggested that the figures are as low as they are because people are much more content to say that they have no faith than they were in the past. And we all know that ‘not having a faith’ is not the same as being an atheist.

But perhaps there is another factor: education.

The ethos of the Roman Catholic schools is to make faith explicit and visible. As a member of the Catholic Education Service wrote: *People see the power of faith when they see the difference that faith makes. So we seek to show that knowing Jesus makes a difference, personally – and makes a difference to society. We in the Church, and all who love the Church, seek to keep finding ways to show all those who say they have no religion, that faith is life transforming.*

In contrast the ethos of CofE schools, even at primary level, has been far less explicit, with much less emphasis on faith development. There is also a strong current in Anglicanism which says that the Church should serve every child in a particular community whether they are believing or not, and whether Christian or Muslim or Sikh or Jew. Respect for other faiths comes before expressing a proud and confident Christianity. Sadly some Anglican schools are faith schools in name only.

Where Catholics have taught from within their tradition, the CofE offers toleration and the equality of faiths. It isn't hard to see why the rates of decline are different.

So where does that take us at St James'?

Our first readings from Proverbs echoes the aims of all those buying extra tuition for their children: *Guard your knowledge and seek wisdom for they are the most precious of jewels. Or the old adage Give me a child until he is seven and I will show you the man.*

Eight years ago the PCC made the decision to really focus on ministry to young families. We made Baptism services more welcoming by inviting families to shape these Masses, choosing the theme and the hymns. All the texts have been simplified and shortened and the readings re-cast in ordinary modern language – and all without losing the essential drama of the occasion.

In parallel we started basic Christianity courses for adults, setting in place the Baptism – First Communion – and (a later) Confirmation pattern of Christian initiation for both adults and young people. .

And despite the constant loss of young families as they move out of London because of poor local schools and cramped housing, we are now at the point of being ready to prepare another new generation of young people for their First Holy Communion – nearly all of whom have been baptized here.

This is exciting because we have had to wait! This hasn't been an easy thing to do and we have wondered if our plans would ever bear fruit. But we have been blessed by a strong Sunday School that has seen its weekly numbers double over the last four years. Undoubtedly that has been a key factor in us reaching this stage.

And what the First Communion programme is clear about is that this form of Christian nurture is not about passing on knowledge per se. These kids won't necessarily be greater experts in Bible knowledge because of their time with us. You can pick that up with a decent i-pad.

What we are doing is getting to know these young people to such a degree that we find ourselves creating a true 'community/ family of faith', saying explicitly what a difference our faith in Jesus makes. The words of today's Gospel *Come to me all you that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest* may not sound that exciting to a bunch of eight or nine year olds but there are ways of sharing the essence of that in ways which ring true for them too.

Because Jesus' alternative to the inequalities of the world is not just to give up but to say 'there is another way'. The educational programme that focuses on facts and figures from Scripture may sound impressive but the ethos of Prince George's school is essentially right: it's about happiness, but happiness through our care of other people: *our faith is revealed when we love all the children of God, because that is what Jess has commanded us to do. (1 John 5).*

So in our preparation for First Holy Communion much of the time is spent building relationships between the children, creating the environment for friendships based on our love of Christ, so that they actively enjoy being in Church to see one another.

And we will draw on the rich treasury of Bible stories to show that this has always been the case – and how disastrous it can be when people can't (or won't) get on with each other.

We then focus on the extraordinary gift of Holy Communion – not as an historical, repetitive ritual but as a life-giving source of love and energy that flows directly from God each and every time we allow ourselves to be fed by him.

Will it stop the massive decline in the numbers of people coming to Church? Is St John making an empty boast about faith conquering the world?

Our society is changing – and being 'non-religious' is clearly where the majority now stand. But we at St James' are committed to laying the foundation for an alternative – and that requires us to be much more explicit about the difference that faith makes. Hoping that, in some way, a Christian ethos will pass on faith is not enough. Frankly, whoever thought it would be?

So I want to end by saying thank-you. Thank you for all your encouragement to visitors and all those who have had the courage to come through those doors. That is priceless. Thank you too for putting up with all those baptisms – all those times when we have been singing 'All things bright and beautiful', 'One more step along the way we go' and 'Sing Hosanna!' because they are the only hymns that many visitors know. I appreciate how tiresome that can seem!

But I cannot stress too much our need to welcome and nurture our young families, allowing them to see and feel the love that God has already planted in their hearts. Our nurture programmes are paying dividends - maybe slowly and modestly but the evidence really is there. And in thanking you for your part in this process I am just reminding us that we all share a responsibility for drawing newcomers into this community so that, by faith, all can discover the light and the joy of knowing Jesus our Lord.