**SERMON FOR TRINITY 13/EDUCATION SUN. | 06.09.2020**

Proverbs 4: 1-13; 1 John 5 1-5; St Matthew 11: 25-30

**Not surprisingly the TV cameras have been in and out of schools and universities this week, revealing all the measures being taken to enable school and college students to return safely after such a long period of lock-down. Staff have had to work immensely hard over the summer trying to make buildings which were not designed for this kind of crisis, able to accommodate the new challenges. It will seem very strange for quite a little while.**

**But alongside all the visors and the sanitising stations, the learning bubbles and the new mix of on-line and face to face learning, is the age-old task of passing on information and developing skills: despite it all, education still needs to continue.**

**I don’t know what your school experience was like, but for many of us, school was a heady mix of interest in at least some of the subjects taught – and the business of finding out how to survive and even to flourish among fellow students – friends and foes alike. We can all recall our favourite teachers – and those who terrified us; moments of inspiration and real success, as well as those times when we found the whole experience a terrible burden, times when we were well supported and times when we felt desperately lonely.**

**One of the paradoxes about the learning environment is that, while there is information to be passed on and particular techniques to be grasped, each of us has to make these things ‘our own’. What we take in will be imbibed into ‘our’ way of understanding, some things accepted, some resisted; some retained for the whole of our lives - and much discarded very quickly.**

**And because that is so, what educationalists tell us is that if we are to make the learning experience at all a rounded and successful one, the setting of that learning has to be generally content and happy. And, second, it has to be a genuinely ‘shared learning approach’ so that those teaching and those learning are engaged in a joint enterprise: the experience of discovery not the rote exercise of passing the maximum amount of second hand information from the front of the classroom to the back! Was that your experience at school: sadly, I suspect it was!**

**But these two elements are very much at the heart of Christian education – or should be. In my secondary school I had two particular blind-spots, Latin and Maths. Both of the subject teachers – Mr Brookes and Mr Irwin – were bullies: Brookes’ nickname was Flogger Brookes! I don’t think they were unique.**

**Which is why, looking back over the last 100 years of Christian education I would say we have generally wasted the greatest resource we ever had. How many children passed through Christian schools (of all denominations) – day schools and boarding schools, primary and secondary, rural and city, with stories of love and encouragement … and how many with stories like mine about my Latin and Maths teachers - and, sadly, much worse abuse still?**

**Likewise, how much time was spent dully learning stuff ‘that just had to be remembered’, from periodic tables to French verbs, and how much was a genuine exploration of the world that God has made, with opportunities for young people to contribute to the discussion as well as be led by those in charge? The educational revolution over the last twenty-five years - certainly at primary school level – involving discovery and research-based learning, was long overdue.**

**And yet it has been at a time when fewer and fewer teachers would claim any Christian faith. Finding RE specialists – especially those of faith – in our educational institutions is increasingly difficult. Teachers may well have been brought up in Church schools and Universities but they now have little or no attachment to our churches. The welcome I receive in local schools when I go to do assemblies is very little to do with me: what the schools are welcoming is someone – anyone - who knows a bit about faith ‘from the inside’. Teachers agree their students ought to meet such people but they are so rarely to be found in our schools, even those which are ostensibly church foundations.**

**Which is both a huge responsibility – and a great opportunity. As our schools and colleges become entirely secular, we in the parishes have to become parallel teaching centres. I don’t need to tell you how vital our Sunday School programme is and how much it is appreciated by parents who find so little religious education being done in school.**

**But it is also vital that we ramp up our adult educational programmes too.**

**And with those two principles underpinning what we are doing: a happy and encouraging environment and a place of genuine exploration where all are involved in sharing the insights they are discovering.**

**And the model, of course, is Jesus. How few of his sermons were facts based and how many were open-ended stories or ‘sayings’ which gave his hearers the chance to make connections and find God’s truth ‘in their own way’.**

**As part of the Agenda for the PCC meeting via zoom on Monday, I will be making some suggestions about how we might make Education an even greater priority here at St James’. Funnily enough zoom may be the means for us to break down the geographical problems about evening study courses. If you live in Upminster – or you have child care issues (or both!) – meeting regularly for a study group is well nigh impossible. But with web- based technology we might – at last – find a way to work together. That is very exciting. We are also proposing a slightly different kind of evening service once a month where we can reflect on a passage on the Bible together, and enjoy some good music at the same time: the working title is ‘Musical Vespers’. A new course of First Communion preparation starts again in two weeks.**

**What struck me so forcibly in today’s Gospel is the mix that Jesus offers in just five short verses. The first is the way that he reassures us that the study of God is open to all: you don’t need three University degrees to take part! And second, he knows that engaging with the Word of God is actually a way of coping with the burdens of life. *Learn from me,* he says, *for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.***

**And that it is what lies at the heart of Christian education. It isn’t about how much you know but about how you learn to apply God’s gentle love in the life that you are leading. That is the wisdom that Proverbs is on about. Wisdom is knowing how to balance all the demands and discovering peace among all the turmoil. As we read: *Wisdom will guard you from all that is false and evil; her teaching will be the best of guardians.* Well Amen to that!**