



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

readings: [Proverbs 22 1-2, 8-9, 22-23](#); [James 2 1-10, 14-17](#); [Mark 7 24-37](#).

8 September 2024

A text for this *Education Sunday*, wrenched from our gospel reading: “Jesus said: *Let the children be fed first.*”

Clive Myrie, journalist and broadcaster, speaking recently at the Derby Book Festival told the story of how his parents were determined to sublimate their own basic needs to ensure that above all he had the best education, in the hope he could become a doctor or a barrister. Indeed after studying law at university, he had secured a place at the prestigious Middle Temple to train as a barrister, only to decline it in favour of becoming a BBC trainee journalist. In later life, his parents still ruefully remind him that all that education had led him becoming “only a quiz show host”. But to be fair, not just any old quiz show, but ‘Mastermind’!

On Mastermind, you are allowed to choose your specialist subject. I’m certainly no Mastermind contestant, but if I were, mine would be ‘Education’. I have spent 75 years involved in it: being educated as a pupil, educating others as a teacher, and then teaching teachers, especially school leaders, and finally researching the subject in my later years and writing books about it. Cynically you could say I could be living proof of the scurrilous adage: “those who can, do; those who can’t, teach; those who can’t teach, teach teachers; and those who can’t teach teachers do education research”. That’s actually not the case, but it does mean I feel equipped to preach on this my ‘specialist subject’ on this Education Sunday, an annual event designated by Churches Together in England as an opportunity for us to pray for and celebrate all those who are directly involved in education.

Although it is nearly 20 years since I last sat in a headteacher’s chair, running a large secular comprehensive school in a socially challenging area, I know from experience how much recognition those who presently work in our schools deserve and value, not just in church schools but in all our schools.

For twenty-first-century schools, as indeed many institutions such as universities, operate within a context of conditions which can seem dark, bleak and depressing. As a result of the financial pressures from an age of austerity, coupled with rising student numbers and ever increasing expectations and demands, there has been a retreat into utilitarianism, with a prevailing ideology that actions and outcomes can only be deemed acceptable if they are seen to be useful and profitable, so that the sole criterion of virtue becomes utility.

Reflecting on this, Bishop John Pritchard when Chair of the Church of England Board of Education, lamented that the consequence had been a world based on value not values, and where education had become increasingly ‘instrumentalist’ with the sole goal of producing students who are fit to contribute to the nation’s wealth. So, trapped between the rock of instrumentalism and the hard place of austerity, schools have been drained of financial support, are buffeted by winds of structural change, beset by ceaseless initiatives, stifled by curriculum retrenchment, judged solely by narrow outcome data and an even more stringent inspection regime, and required to be led not by dedicated leaders but simply by efficient managers. A leading Roman Catholic theological educator, Professor John Sullivan, has trenchantly termed this as “wrestling with managerialism”, having to operate within a prevailing ethos which has stripped public services of moral and ethical values and replaced them with the market language of costs, efficiencies, profits and competition, so that anything which is not easily quantified becomes undervalued or abandoned.

Sadly a society that prioritises the study of business, economics and finance at the expense of the arts, humanities and social sciences, all those things which help us understand ourselves and others better, and also better to understand our own place in history, will produce generations that understand budgets, balance sheets and bottom lines, but very little else.

In short, we have become obsessed with *value, not values*. But schools should not be education factories for value but should be incubators of values, and those values should be gospel ones: compassion, justice, integrity, humility, forgiveness, love... to name but a few. And please note that church schools do not have a monopoly on these, for they are values that all good schools can sign up to, and do sign up to.

But we as a church are called upon to play a part not just in proclaiming those values, but in working towards their promulgation, for as our Epistle reminds us “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17). So in 2016, the Church of England produced and implemented a seminal document setting out a Vision for Education not just for what should go on in church schools but in all schools. It is a vision for the common good, a vision of human flourishing, for “life in all its fullness” as Jesus promised (John 10:10), a vision underpinned by the 4 cardinal virtues of *Wisdom, Community, Dignity and Hope*. These are the 4 basic elements which should be the birthright of all God’s children.

Wisdom is more than just knowledge or skills: it is about ethics as well as cognition, values and purposes as well as facts. It is far greater than anything that can be measured by standardised tests or Ofsted inspections. It encompasses emotional intelligence and creativity, an ability to discern truth amongst the babble of fake news (and never was that ability more important than now, as we have seen so recently). It gives an understanding of what it means to be a good person, a good citizen, a good team member, a good leader, a life-long learner within a community of learners. There is biblical precedent for this; for Jesus gathered his disciples into such a community of learning, he sat down with them, made time for them, pondered with them the big questions of life in community: what are you seeking, what do you fear, what can you contribute, how can you relate. So it is apposite that the theme of this year’s Education Sunday is set as “*Learning Together: Education in Community*”.

Community recognises that we are not alone, that there is such a thing as society, that we are intrinsically involved with others, utterly relational in our shared learning, our shared humanity and our shared responsibility for one another and for the finite resources of our planet. Jesus himself taught and exemplified the centrality of such relationships in his teaching, commanding us to “Love God, and love our neighbour as ourselves”.

Dignity recognises and respects the ultimate worth of each and every one of our neighbours, near and far, acknowledges their diversity and difference and upholds their human rights, irrespective of that difference. Jesus embodies and exemplifies the love and compassion of God for all his children, and we are called to follow him, however imperfectly, in demonstrating this in deed as well as in word.

And finally in this catalogue of virtues comes *Hope*. Note that hope is not the same as mindless optimism that refuses to face the facts. Hope must be intertwined with moral and spiritual values, and it must also carry with it a commitment to action. Jesus offers us the hope that this is possible, even in our fallen world. Wrongdoing and evil, suffering and death are not the last word about reality. Jesus offers us not only a realism about how flawed and fallible we are, but also hope, that through his transforming power, he can indeed make all things new. But he needs us to walk with him in this, to play our part.

So our schools must educate not just for wealth-creation but for well-being; not just for preparation to enter the marketplace but for preparation for life in all its fullness; not just to enable pupils to compete as individuals but to co-operate in the service of others. All this can be achieved if we can put aside our single-minded obsession solely with examination outcomes, and focus on educating for these core components of *Wisdom, Community, Dignity, and above all Hope*.

The playwright David Hare asks “What do schoolchildren need? Access to hope. And most of all, access to convincing voices of hope”. In our schools and in our society, we as Christians are called to be those “convincing voices of hope”, called to deliver the hope that future generations, fed through education, are thus enabled to find out, find faith, and fuel action.

**The Revd Dr Alan Flintham
Cathedral Chaplain**

Update on Derby Cathedral School

Following the sermon, a short address was given by Jenny Brown, Headteacher of Derby Cathedral School.

On this Education Sunday, I've been asked to give a bit of a glimpse into the vision and purpose for Derby Cathedral School.

Our Background:

For those of you who are not too aware of who we are: we are still a fairly new school in Derby. Having started life 6 years ago in Midland House next to the railway station with only one group of year 7s, we moved into our new building 3 years ago in Great Northern Road. This year is our final year of growth, so we now have all year groups from year 7 to year 13.

We started as the result of a joint vision from the Cathedral and the Diocesan Board of Education to provide Church of England secondary education for the city of Derby, and we are still the only Church of England secondary school within the diocese.

Our Vision:

In the sermon, we have just heard that the Church of England's Vision for Education is to provide an education that enables all students to experience life in all its fullness, to be deeply Christian and to serve the common good. So how do we do that at Derby Cathedral School? And what does it mean to us to be deeply Christian, to serve the common good and to bring life in all its fullness to our students?

The opening line of our vision statement is this:

"Derby Cathedral School is a Christian community that welcomes students, families, and visitors of all faiths and none. The diversity and richness of such a family brings depth and a vibrancy to our core."

Our school serves the city of Derby which is itself a richly diverse city and our cohorts reflect this diversity in so many ways. Just over 50% have a heritage that is not white British, our students have families who come from many other countries across the world and they speak a variety of different languages. It is always a great joy to witness the many facets of this diversity on a day to day basis. Indeed the Book of Revelation gives us this vision of heaven:

"After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." (Revelation 7: 9-10)

So for me, when our students are together it gives me a small taste of what we will experience in heaven.

Our work is to serve our community, to serve the students and families in the city of Derby, to serve the common good. Especially those who need and benefit the most from a strong stable community with core values and practice that reflects God's love.

Just as Christ reached out to all kinds of people, we are also not selective. Our admissions criteria reflect the fact that Christ often sought out the most vulnerable and marginalised in society. In fact our admissions criteria promote those who are more vulnerable. As a result, nearly 60% of our community are classed as disadvantaged from a family income perspective. This brings a great deal of challenge but also the opportunity to act as the Bible teaches us. A chance to bring Christ's redeeming love into the mess and brokenness of people's lives.

Our Values:

However the purpose of our school is not just to provide materially for those in need. It is to provide a strong education through the lens of Christian principles.

At Derby Cathedral School we do this through our FAITH values. The five words that make up this phrase are *Fellowship, Aspiration, Integrity, Tenacity and Humility*. They are themes woven through the Bible, and threads that run through all that we do in school. They are designed to give a framework for our students to actively and deliberately shape their character no matter what their faith or whether they have one at all. We teach, demonstrate and reward these values. We work to ensure our students know what they mean, where they come from, how to demonstrate them and why they are important.

Our vision statement ends with these words:

“All students will be well prepared for their next step into future education, training and employment. They will be happy, healthy, confident, life-long learners who ‘experience life in all its fullness’ (John 10:10)”

The framework of the FAITH values and the opportunities we plan for our students both in and beyond the classroom all feed into this final line. We want our students to be able to access the fullness of life that Christ brings to us. The teenage years are not easy ones to navigate and so it is all the more important that they have the opportunity to flourish.

Enrichment:

There are many examples of experiences beyond the classroom that I could list that we give to our students: the trips abroad, visiting speakers, work experience for all students in years 10 and 12, our Science & Technology day, and culture days at the end of the school year.

But one of the most important enrichment experiences we give our students is you here at the Cathedral. Our link with Derby Cathedral is a real joy and privilege for all of us. Our students all visit the Cathedral at least once a year for a special service. This begins with our year 7 students for their welcome service, then every year a return for either a service at Christmas or Easter and then to finish their time with us with a special leavers service. But that is not all; we have been part of many other experiences here: using the space for a variety of curriculum activities, the fantastic music partnership with Alex and his team, and being part of other events such as God and the Big Bang.

All of these lead to our students feeling part of your community. They are comfortable in this place and in your presence. They feel part of a bigger community, another one in which they feel and experience the love of Christ.

Through experiencing Christ’s love through our communities, they have hope and can flourish into young adults who can indeed experience “life in all its fullness”.

**Jenny Brown,
Headteacher,
Derby Cathedral School.**