

Called – Talk for Called, Connected and Committed National Conference, 1 February 2018

“The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’” (John 1. 43)

These are almost the first words that Jesus speaks in St John's Gospel, and in Matthew's Gospel when he calls the first disciples and throughout the New Testament these words shape the Christian vocation: when we say we are called we mean, fundamentally, that we are *called by someone*.

We are called by Jesus. He is the one who comes to find us, to cherish us and to show us what humanity is supposed to look like when we live our lives in community with God.

Therefore, a church school will always be a place where knowledge of what it is to be human will be shaped by the conviction that we human beings are made in the image of God, and made for community with God; that our hearts will always be restless until they find their rest in God, and that a Christian education is a whole lot more than learning a lot of stuff about God: it is the absolute conviction and recognition that fullness of life requires us to nurture the spiritual – which is the beating heart of the living God in us. This is also the gift of faith to the whole of education; for all of us it is the interplay of mind body and spirit that make for a complete education, and that to neglect the spiritual is to impoverish our humanity.

We are all called by God: called to be fully human and called to be fully ourselves.

We dare to believe that God holds in his heart an image of what every human being is capable of becoming. And in opposition to the false gods of a world which persists in telling us that a certain designer label pair of jeans, an expensive perfume, a fast car or the latest cosmetic surgery can bring us happiness, asserts that God does want to change us, but not into someone else. That is the illusion the world peddles.

God wants to change us into ourselves; into the person we are capable of becoming, using and utilising our gifts to the full. This is our call.

A school can therefore, be the place where God achieves this transformation: by emphasising the spiritual and the moral alongside the social and the intellectual, and with those particular instruments of grace that the church calls affirmation, and by the spiritual disciplines of prayer, contemplation and penitence, people become themselves. And they do it simply by hearing the call of God – though this call is received and mediated in a thousand different ways – and follow in in the way of Jesus Christ.

School leaders, therefore, have a particular calling and vocation. First, to manifest this joyful renewal and affirmation in their own lives – you are spiritual leaders - and to see that the greatest gift they can bestow on others is the affirmation of God's love, God's presence and God's call. It is in the knowledge of this love that we flourish and become ourselves.

It is not that these things cannot happen in every school, but as Madeleine Bunting wrote in the Guardian nearly ten years ago now, the danger is that "they lack the familiarity, the symbols, the narratives and historys that bring the abstract to emotional life."

Herein lies the abiding beauty (and can we say genius) of Christian faith. We Christians do not believe in a set of abstract principles. Our faith is not a moral code or set of philosophical

propositions. We believe in a person, and that through that person God is revealed. And we believe – more than that, it is our experience - that God communicates to us directly. It is always Jesus who is calling us.

We receive this call through the stories, letters and histories of those who went before us and who collected and recorded the impact of Christ in their lives. We receive this call through the community of the church which is that company of men and women whose lives continue to be shaped by the impact of Christ in their lives today; and we receive this call through the provocative, disturbing and affirming presence of the Holy Spirit. The abstract – those things which all human beings long for, peace, goodwill, equity and understanding – are given emotional life and resonance through the person of Jesus Christ himself, through the scriptures and through the Church and through the outpouring of the Spirit. It is our calling.

Therefore – and let me put it even more bluntly – for us education is quite simply impossible without reference to God. Not all politicians get this. Not all church leaders do! You see, the Church of England is involved in education just because lots of parents seem to want their children to go to a church school (though they do!). And we don't just have these schools because we've always had them. We are involved in education because we have been called by Christ to a fullness of life. And though a church school must not be a place for proselytization, it must be the place where the call to be fully human encounters that fullness of life which is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. This life giving and life affirming narrative shapes a whole curriculum. For us, and for all who share our vision, ethos and values - those things parents crave and politicians regard with awe - cannot to be separated from belief and practice. This is a vision for education we gladly share with everyone and with all schools

But let me give the last word to the ever subversive Spirit: some years ago when I was still living and working in Huddersfield in West Yorkshire I regularly took assemblies at Lindley Church of England Infant School. All three of my boys went there. It was, and I'm sure still is, a fantastic little school. After the assembly – sorry, am I off message here, should that be collective worship? - I usually went into the staffroom and had a coffee and a chat with the teachers. On one occasion, a teacher came into the staffroom bursting with delight about something that happened in her class that morning. I never quite got the educational purpose of the exercise, but what she had been doing was bringing the children to the front of the class one at a time, blindfolding them, and getting them to identify various objects, as it were, in the dark.

One little girl came to the front of the class. She was about six or seven. The teacher put on the blindfold, and then - as you do - to check that the blindfold was on properly, asked the little girl, "Can you see?" The little girl replied, yes. The teacher checked the blindfold, made sure it was on properly, and said again, can you see? And again the little girl said, yes. At this point, the teacher knew something was up. There was no way the little girl could see anything. The blindfold was on properly.

So the teacher, being a wise and experienced person, came at the situation from a different angle. Instead of saying, can you see, she asked the little girl, "*What* can you see?" And the little girl replied: "Trees and flowers and rivers and mountains."

And I thought it was so beautiful. Here was this little girl, standing in the dark, and what could she see? Well, she could see everything.

And then I thought to myself: what will we teach this little girl? Well, we will teach her that she is wrong. That, she can't really see trees and flowers and rivers and mountains; it is just her imagination.

And then I remember those words about faith in the letter to the Hebrews: that it is "the assurance of things hoped for, the convictions of things not seen." (Hebrews 11. 1)

The deepest realities, the things that matter most to the human heart, the things which motivate and inspire and draw us on, these are things unseen.

I do not see and hear Christ calling me in the way that Philip, Peter and Andrew heard and saw him. But I do believe that the call of Christ upon my life is the deepest and most important reality of my life and is the only hope for the world.

And I also believe that while all of us involved in education rightly and properly see our task as shaping the progress of human life from childhood through to adulthood so that each person can achieve their potential and even discover who they truly are in Christ, we must also acknowledge that while we are trying to turn children into adults, God's Holy Spirit is confounding and subverting us at every turn, and trying to turn adults into children. For when Jesus was asked who is the greatest in the kingdom he placed a little child in their midst. Not because he was sentimental about children, but because, I suppose, he saw in them a need and an openness to others, and a keen delight in the things that are unseen, that is often educated out of us as we enter the adult world.

Let this not be so with us. Jesus says that the kingdom of God belongs to those who are poor in spirit, which surely means those who know their need of God, those who do not take themselves too seriously, those who recognise they need resources outside of themselves and those who are open to the joy and mystery of life, those who have not got everything worked out.

Head Teachers, Chairs of Governing Bodies, Leaders of Academy Trusts, Diocesan Directors of Education, University representatives, school leaders, I esteem you. I thank you that you have heard - or perhaps for some of you 'are hearing' - the call of God, and that in being called to be yourself and to use your best gifts of time and wit and wisdom in the service of education, you are affirmed yourselves, your hearts enlarged, and you are becoming more the people you are meant to be.

I also pray that you will learn to close your eyes and see within you and beyond you the unimaginable beauty of God and of his purposes for the world; and that a little child may lead you.

+Stephen
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