



**Read the Archbishop's sermon at Kottayam Cathedral this morning on the first day of his 10-day visit to India.**

May I start by thanking the Bishop and the Cathedral Pastor for their welcome to Kottayam and the privilege of preaching at the Cathedral. I am particularly grateful to be preaching on the subject of education on this your Education Sunday.

Education has been one of the main emphases of Christian ministry around the world throughout the history of the Church. In India, of course, education takes place in the context of one of the most ancient civilisations, where different faith traditions have all based themselves in story and scripture, and the Church of South India, a United Church with different constituent traditions; an indigenous and Indian church; autonomous and united but a member of the Anglican Communion has been part of that great civilising tradition.

The question that we struggle with in the United Kingdom is the purpose of education. It has always been seen as civilising as a way of opening people's eyes to a broader horizon than the one they can see in the place where they live. In the later decades of the twentieth century it became functional, to equip the country to be effective in coping with new technologies and to be competitive on the world stage.

Yet when we go back to the Bible, we see that teaching is for the purpose of wisdom, and wisdom is for the purpose of knowing how we should live in a way that pleases God through Jesus Christ.

To put it more simply, education is there to enable people to think rightly in a changing world and in different circumstances.

Just over fifty years ago, the first human being to do so put his feet on the surface of the moon. The mathematics necessary for the challenge of building the Apollo rocket and taking it to the moon, were incredibly complicated. Yet the computers of the time were basically human beings. In fact, at NASA, the word computer did not mean a machine, it meant a person who did computing, who added and did mathematics necessary in order for the engineers to have reliable input. In the end the computer became a machine, and the mathematicians became those who knew how to tell it what to do.

Today a smart phone has more computing power than the machines that got the Apollo rockets to launch and the capsules to go to the moon and back.

We only look at that example to recognise that education that simply teaches the techniques and knowledge of a given moment is not sufficient. It will inevitably lead to people being unable to adapt to the new, and being incapable of seeing both the opportunities and dangers of change.

We see this clearly in our Old Testament reading. Nehemiah as I'm sure you remember, is a book about the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the exile. The work, when we get to chapter eight, has been completed, and the people gather to celebrate that the walls now make Jerusalem

defensible, that there is a place for the daily sacrifice, that the gates are back in place, and that once more Jerusalem is a home for the Jewish people, some eighty or so years after the exile began.

To celebrate they read the law, and the result is catastrophic. Some of us may have had the experience of going to a party where everything went wrong, everyone argued, and you wished that you'd not been part of the celebration, because it was not fun. This was what was happening.

As the people heard the law read from the front they began to weep and cry because they realised how badly they had done. The answer was not to forget the law, but to teach them, to educate them in what its underlining meaning was. In verse 8 the Levites helped the people to understand the law; they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading. In verse 10 Nehemiah says to them

'go your way eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those to whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our laws; and do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'

This is education. They are still a subject people with a foreigner ruling them and so it must be explained to them that their strength is found in God and not in their own armies, to compare themselves to where they were 100 years earlier would be a disaster. Education gives us adaptability to change. With climate change, robotics, with bio engineering, with the extraordinary skills that we see in this country, who can imagine the world of fifty years' time, when those at school today are reaching their retirement? Will it be a world that we can recognise? What will be the role of machines that can learn? What will people be like with so much disease able to be healed?

They need to understand and to be wise so that hearing who God is they may see that the God of the scriptures is Lord over all these things.

So, what are they to be taught? Obviously, they must be taught the standard aspects of learning. They must be taught reading, writing, mathematics, geography, history, the sciences, computer sciences, the human and biological understandings of what human identity is and how it works. Schools must always teach these things for they provide the framework that enables us to think.

But they must also be taught about what is right and wrong, they must be given the opportunity thinking for themselves, owning it for themselves because they have been allowed to discuss to consider and to reflect on the question of what is a good life?

The danger of the new learning that is coming is that it is the leaning that divides, that it is the learning only for those with resources. For the rich, since they have resources, they accumulate skills without moral values, and we end with a world where the rich and the poor are ever more divided when power emerges from a computer keyboard. We may end with a world where the ships of the rich are automated, and robots do the hard work that no human wants to do, whereas amongst the poor there is only suffering.

That is the age that is happily passed with the end of imperialism. But it is an age which is constantly seeking to return, because people seek

power, in order that may have wealth and privilege.

Our gospel reading is the most beautiful in all creation in describing those sorts of people in whose hands the future of the world is safe, climate change is managed, and the inequalities and injustices of life never cease to be challenged. The beatitudes speak of those who are blessed, of the wisdom of living in a way in which we may be cursed by human beings, because we will be blessed in heaven the beatitudes speak of peace, of persecution, of purity, of mercy, of righteousness, of humility, of sorrow and of struggle. And they speak also of the deep wisdom that these things are the areas in which God brings blessing and in which God is faithful.

And education that has running through every conventional subject, the golden thread of wisdom and righteousness of what it is to be a person who is blessed, of gentleness and hope, is an education that enables change to be dealt with while including the dignity of the human being at its centre. It makes a world of development not a threat but a hope, and a world of technological advance not one in which mere competition results in the rich sitting comfortable while the poor are marginalised, but one in which everybody benefits.

Let us then turn to the passage from Acts, for this is yet another story of education. It is education immersed in action and in experience.

No doubt the computers of NASA, the human beings that designed and created the rocket that went to the moon could have done it theoretically. But in the end, a rocket went to the moon, as the Indian one did earlier this year, in late July. Experience tested theory.

When Apollos was met by Pricilla and Aquila as Paul tells us in Acts 18, his knowledge was very considerable, but his experience was very limited. Pricilla and Aquila proceeded to educate him so that both knowledge and experience came together and the result was that in testimony of what God had done and in wisdom in defending those actions was consistent with the will and history of the work of God in the Jewish people, he was able to demonstrate truth.

Education that is theoretical is merely information. Education that leads people to experience reality is one that changes lives and transforms the future.

Let me take another example. Many years ago, when I was at school, we had to spend some time, being at a very privileged school, working with those who had particular disadvantages.

I was assigned to work with people with learning difficulties. I still remember, once a week bicycling into the nearby town, and spending time with people who were struggling with reading writing. It was a very basic, and limited experience, but it transformed my understanding.

A year or two later I spent seven months in Kenya working in a country school without running water or mains electricity, without proper toilets, seeking to teach people in a tin roofed mud hut. There again I learnt more than I taught as the knowledge which I was seeking to transfer was

vastly outweighed my understanding of the suffering and trials of those who attended the school.

Education and experience must go together. If the beatitudes are to be taught, if knowledge of all the subjects that are needed in the sciences and the technologies are to be valuable then they need the words that we had in the psalm in verses 41 and 42:

‘let your steadfast love come to me oh lord, your salvation according to your promise. That I shall have an answer to those who taunt me because I trust in your word.’

Where we have experienced the love of God in the education, where knowledge has been illuminated with truth and the spirit, where experience has grounded knowledge in compassion for those who are marginalised than education is transformative not only of one person's life chances but of the whole of society.

8 min read

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