

Archbishop Justin Welby shares his thoughts in Tes about the importance of community and schools at a time of struggle, and the need to have hope.

This morning I led perhaps the largest school assembly in this country's history. This was a daunting privilege - and a rather surreal one, since I was leading it from my iPad while sitting in my kitchen.

The theme of the assembly was hope, which is something we all need in this time of crisis. During the assembly, pupils from around the country talked about what that word means to them. The assembly was one of the ways that so many of us are supporting schools to maintain community during this time of lockdown and social distancing.

I spoke about one of my heroes, Nelson Mandela, who knew a lot about this subject. Not hope in its over-used sense of crossing your fingers when you buy a lottery ticket. But hope that is based on what I call “the three P’s” - positivity, patience, and keeping going under pressure.

The need for hope

That was what kept Mandela going during 26 years of imprisonment - and allowed him to emerge with a new vision of how his country could be.

Hope is the foundation of education. Schools are places of hope, because they are about preparing young people for the future. The belief that the future of every child has inherent value is a fundamentally hopeful one.

Today, the Church of England is launching ‘Faith at Home’ - a programme of resources to help schools, households and churches to explore questions of faith during this time of lockdown. And to inspire children and young people to build new habits and practices at home that will serve them long after this crisis has passed.

Engaging spirituality

The programme will feature high-quality video materials led by children, young people, staff and leaders from across our network of 4,500 schools. Over the next three months, Faith at Home will explore themes including courage, love, patience, generosity, resilience, love and - fittingly - hope.

The resources will offer simple ways of approaching complex and difficult topics, such as illness, fear and bereavement. They seek to support households, schools and churches in the ongoing work of helping children and young people to develop that intangible but profoundly important

thing: character.

The coronavirus pandemic is forcing all of us - whatever our age - to confront difficult, frightening and painful questions. These are questions that none of us can explore on our own: we need each other to help navigate them.

Support in tough times

In my experience, these conversations are never simply about adults imparting their wisdom. As you will know so well as educators, children and young people bring enormous wisdom, creativity and intelligence to the table. (Anyone who has taken part in a seder, the meal that Jewish families and households share at Passover, will know how fitting it is that the youngest person is given the responsibility of asking the most important questions.)

While children and young people might usually explore these issues at school or in a church or other religious centre, for now the primary place for such questions is in the home.

I'm not necessarily calling for a return to a time when families said grace before every meal, or prayed together each morning and evening - although, that would be rather wonderful. But as well as providing support and resources, Faith at Home also poses a challenge: can we use this time to reimagine some of what it means to help children develop and deepen their spiritual lives?

A deeper understanding

And by that I don't only mean through prayer, conversation and reflection. Those are crucial places to begin. But the adventure of the spiritual life also lies in what those activities lead to - loving action in the service of the common good; solidarity with the weakest, poorest and most excluded, and seeing what we have as being for the benefit of all.

That is why my hope and prayer for Faith at Home is that it not only provides children and young people with ways to engage with the difficult questions being posed by our current crisis. But that it also inspires them to explore how they can become the answers to their own prayers, and, when this crisis is over, that they are freshly inspired to love and serve those around them.

In the Church of England this is what we mean when we talk about nurturing young people to live life in all its fullness - inspired by Jesus' message in the Gospel of John: "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it abundantly."

Praise for teachers

As teachers and school leaders, please be assured that I pray for you regularly. The work you do in the service of our children and young people - and of our whole society - is valuable beyond measure. It is always a privilege to work alongside you, and especially so at this painful and difficult time. I also pray for those parents who are now home schooling their children in unprecedented and often stressful circumstances.

I believe there is plenty we can do to make this not just a time of restrictions, but also a time of growth - for our young people, but also for all of us. I believe we can emerge from this crisis with new habits, new motivations, and new commitments to work together for the common good.

Nelson Mandela once said, “May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears.” During this extraordinary time, may that be true of us too.

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