



Faith in Education

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Isaiah 40: 21–end 1 Corinthians 9: 16–23

“Alastair?” “Yes,” I replied, tentatively. The scene: a bus, the early 1980s, rattling along an A-road somewhere in North Wales, containing a few dozen eleven and twelve year olds having just spent a week under canvas on the Nefyn Peninsula on a Crusaders summer camp – the smell must have been something else. “Alastair?” “Yes.” “Are you a Christian?”

Good evening, what an immense privilege it is to be allowed to speak to you in the College Chapel, thank you. In terms of the title on which I address you, it is a mark of Trinity’s inestimable Faith in Education that I have been allowed into this pulpit. Perhaps Chaplain Kirsty was not able to speak to any of the Fellows who supervised me before the invitation was made. Yet I am very reassured, as a teacher, standing meekly at the epicentre of intellectual excellence, to think that amongst the grandeur and rigour of academic progress *faith* has its place alongside research, experimentation and debate in education.

When asked to suggest readings for this evening, I was delighted to discover the hand of Providence in the Lectionary providing the ones we have heard and I have used them to guide my thinking. I will turn first to Isaiah.

It may be helpful for us to know more of the context of this reading. Isaiah was a prophet writing in the eighth century BC in the kingdom of Judah. He was active for forty years through the reigns of four kings of Judah. The book Isaiah itself is difficult. Being the work of a prophet and visionary, the words move through narrative to prophesy (Isaiah is cited more than any other prophet by NT writers), through poetry, words of comfort, warning and rebuke. The literary style is diverse and unpredictable as well as dramatic: this is the book that gives the passage, ‘Those who walked in darkness have seen a great light’. Not until the book of Revelation does writing in the collection of books of the Bible reach the colourful, descriptive and dazzling heights as it does in Isaiah.

Isaiah is writing at a time when the Kingdom of Judah is in terminal decline both inwardly, through degeneracy and weak government, and externally, on the brink of immolation by the Assyrian Empire. There is a feeling of dread and inevitability throughout the book of the collapse of the state, the destruction of Jerusalem and the inevitable enslavement of the Jewish people – which then unfolds in the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations.

In this historical setting, and the context of faith in education, verses suggest that even the youths – those whom we typically educate – grow faint and weary under circumstance, but those that wait upon the Lord, those then that have faith, wait for it, that most beautiful exalting phrase: *they shall mount up with wings as eagles*. With faith, the educated, those who have known God, can be transfigured. We find our meaning, our hand-rail and touchstone right there.

How do those of us who would educate, those of us who would enable and fortify, approach those youths who are faint and weary? The verses from Corinthians we have heard give us this sign – once we get past St Paul's woebegone protestations about the atrocious travails of preaching the gospel – when he says: unto the Jews I became a Jew; to those without law, as without law; to the weak I became as weak; I made all things to all people. St Paul is saying that to bring the gospel, the good news, the knowledge, the education that would mount us up with wings as eagles, we have to find people where they are, meet people at their level, place and space, if our faith is to be shared. To have faith is to change, to mutate within ourselves. To bring that faith to others is to go through that mutation process again and again, refreshed with each new educational encounter. This is a central Pauline idea, the sharing of the gospel, the having of knowledge – *gnosis*, in classical Greek – and was highly prevalent as the interreligious concept of Gnosticism in the Mediterranean world of the first century AD, the milieu in which Paul was immersed whilst establishing Churches in Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica and elsewhere. This belief system held that creation, including the human, was an emanation of God, and thus held trapped within it the divine spark, and that spark could be liberated by knowledge.

To me, an educationalist with faith, this Gnostic idea is resonant and attractive: education, by meaning, is a process of drawing out, sometimes dragging out perhaps, but nonetheless one of releasing what is within the faint and weary youth rather than cramming it in with stuff of our own. I prefer our role to be one of release and enabling rather than imposing and directing. I have been the beneficiary of faith in me in education on many occasions in my too fortunate life, but I remember one central life-changing one where my English teacher had faith in me – but on what grounds or evidence I cannot say, and that I suppose is what made it faith. I was a typical fifteen-and-a-half-year-old grammar school boy who wasn't doing much in English other than just about scraping by, mystified by literature, not having read anything since Willard Price's adventures of Hal and Roger. I was doing badly with war poets and Julius Caesar when one morning, in a pin-drop silent classroom of twenty boys with marked homework essays being handed back, my own dismal effort (something on Sassoon – twelve out of twenty for the record) was accompanied, plop, by a paperback of Greene's *The Power and the Glory*. I looked left and right, gingerly, still more cautiously in front and behind – turning round of course was strictly forbidden – no one else had been given a book. I read it from cover to cover that weekend and from there reading voraciously through the rest of Greene and on to Endo, his Japanese counterpart, culminating in a coursework essay under the title of a 'Trial of Faith', fittingly enough for this evening, comparing *The Power and the Glory* with Endo's *The Samurai* (thirty-seven out of forty on that one, for the record).

But how did Mr Pearsall know? Why did he think that would release some sort of a spark in me? He gave me a lifelong love of the novel; he found it in me though, albeit in eccentric fashion, he didn't teach it to me. This experience has become central to my own expression of faith and its purpose in education. Furthermore, appreciating the great privilege that it is to have the vocation that I share with others, and not least the realisation that whatever I release, enable or allow to flourish in my charges (who are only ever temporarily in my care),

whatever is drawn out of them will always be greater and will always have longer lasting significance than anything I will have tried to inculcate. It is then an astonishing responsibility to occupy this accompanying role, in my field through teenage years; trusting, having faith, proper hope that education, that drawing out, releasing of sparks, won't merely allow someone to struggle on through but allow them to triumph, to scale heights, go from benthos to halcyon, mounted on wings as eagles. It is a fearsome challenge indeed and St Paul gives us the right start: meet those that you would educate where they are, do not hector from your standpoint, however masterful your exposition might be; make all things to all people.

Being on the same level though is not enough, education is development, it is inevitable change, your pupils will not be the same people they were last week, change will happen anyway, crude and chaotically; as faithful educators the calling is to allow the change to be illuminated by the liberated spark. We know from sometimes rueful experience that change, development and progress happen when the challenge is at its greatest.

As a 'BioNatsci' I was lucky to have been shown in countless life processes exactly this principle. There is a saying: what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I have to say I rather enjoy the cynical darker deconstruction of this wisdom: what doesn't kill you is merely postponing the inevitable. But that aside, what doesn't kill you does indeed make you stronger. The immune system responds to an infection, it synthesises antibodies, clones wonderful entities called natural killer cells that with the nanoscopic equivalents of bullets and gas weapons destroy the invading cells and crucially retain a memory of the offender so the same pathogen is despatched faster next time. Indeed, we know that unchallenged immune systems are less able to respond to the environment later in life perhaps leading to allergies, intolerances and disastrous infections. The same is true in physical training of the type that I was so pleased to enjoy as an undergraduate running to Grantchester and back learning essay plans for Tripos. Even now when I run I can't help but recall the integration processes of transposons and the comparative social structures of hyenas and lions. Every session of training, properly conducted, damages the body just a little bit, pulls the muscle fibres, scuffs the cartilage, tenses the ligaments, puts torsion on the bones, just a little bit; and we know the good sessions because we have the aches the next day. But the crucial element is that the body responds by repairing and going one step further – rebuilding and growing beyond the initial point. The mind is no different: whilst we have thought intuitively for millennia that mental stimulation leads to a better structure to our thinking and improved intellectual capacity, it is only in the last few years that neuroscience and imaging techniques have shown us, first with rats and most recently in human subjects, that with each thought thunk, every sight beheld, all sounds audited, words read, problems solved and facts learned, the brain manifestly changes. More links – dendrites and synapses to be technical – grow between nerve cells in the brain of the stimulated subject making for better thinking, more sophisticated cognition and thus making more links again – a virtuous cycle. Indeed the reason for the change in the size from the infant head to the adult one is as much about accommodating all the extra wiring for these burgeoning links rather than for new cells themselves. Furthermore, in the context of a sermon in this profoundly cerebral institution, it is in your frontal lobes, the highest centres for thought, conceptualisation, memory and reflection, that this connection-making and sensitivity is at its peak in the teenage years and early twenties – in some small way I am changing some minds here tonight as I speak.

Conversely the uninspired brain atrophies, loses connectivity and becomes physiologically depressed; that spark we seek grows obscured, finding it harder to gain the pathway for its release, in a way strongly analogous to the unexercised muscle losing tone and strength.

And so this is the cheerful obligation, the duty of faith in education, to recognise the scope of our calling: seek to meet all people on their own terms, to know that in the process of helping that spark that is within to shine and be liberated, not only will the faint and weary be restored but the true scope of each person's potential may be realised – and at its best, as an individual and precise engagement. To have faith in the educational journey is a prayerful challenge through which growth and development is wrought. The spark we hope to discern may be divine but our work in finding it is distinctly human and fallible. That work has to bridge the gap between where we start and whatever may come from a flourishing educational engagement. That is a work of faith and hope.

So with this in mind I would disagree with the aphorism 'life is not a rehearsal', but rather life is a ceaseless sequence of rehearsals, of challenges, shortcomings, falling down, recovering, regenerating, facing up, moving on, challenging again, partial success and so on, with faith as the relentless resilient sentinel bearing the endeavour along all the while. As Samuel Beckett would have it in *Endgame*: 'Ever Tried, Ever Failed, No Matter, Try Again, Fail Again, Fail Better'. In life's rehearsals we meet our limitations and we adapt to them, we find new traits – the sparks within us – to overcome them. In rehearsals we become more fully ourselves, in education taking others on a journey to see what we might be within and without, not merely repeating what we already know. These challenges are unpredictable until they come close, challenges of love, of compassion, of empathy, of resilience, of commitment; a ceaseless sequence of rehearsals, in faith, until at last we meet GOD face to face.

Back to the bus in North Wales, insistently now, "Are you a Christian?" I sank back down on my seat. I remember staring with intense detail at the cigarette stubbing-plate on the back of the chair in front of me as I said, "Yes, LORD, I am a Christian." I can't remember if I spoke it, but the words were very loud in my head. Anyone can educate, even with a casual question: release the spark and give someone faith for life.