

## **The Church School and the Transformation of Communities**

### ***A Paper for the Anglican Academy and Secondary School Heads***

Josey used to go to Friday night bingo on the West View Estate in Hartlepool where I served my first incumbency. She would be wheeled along to our church hall in her wheelchair by her musclebound son, and he needed to be musclebound because not only was Josey colossal beyond imagining, but strapped to the chair was a huge cylinder of oxygen required for her CPD. All through bingo she would sit with a cigarette in one hand and the oxygen mask in the other, switching every couple of minutes from one type of gas to the other.

One day I confided in Josey that my vicarage had been burgled again and that I had lost a TV and a DVD player. 'My son will sort that, Father. Come round in an hour,' she replied mysteriously. So I went round in an hour to their council house which was quite near to the church. There was a baseball bat behind the front door and a loud and psychopathic dog who was clearly furious to be locked up in the kitchen. And there, also sitting in the hall, were my TV and DVD player, returned by those who had stolen them and awaiting my collection. 'They won't be bothering you again, Father,' the son said with a chilling air of authority.

West View was that kind of estate. It always came top of the crime figures, it kept the Police busy, the takeaway shops refused to deliver there, the streets on Friday and Saturday night were terrorised by hundreds of young people roving around in gangs and consuming vast amounts of Diamond White and teenage conception was almost the norm.

I developed very strong links with the community schools on the estate and was pleased to be the first priest for years to be allowed into the comprehensive school where the Headteacher was a professional atheist. I felt quite sorry for the man. He was soon to retire and was utterly exhausted by years of running an under-resourced school in a decrepit set of buildings on what everyone called a sink estate. GSCE A\*-C results were in single figures.

He coped by setting tight boundaries. When I asked him about the range of social problems ravaging the estate he would simply say, 'That's not my problem. When these kids walk through the school gates at the end of the day, my responsibility ends.' As far as he was concerned, he took the pupils in at the morning, employed teachers to educate them and then sent them home again. Outside of those few hours, responsibility for the pupils lay with their parents. If his pupils got drunk at night, got pregnant, drifted into crime or gangs, that was not his responsibility. As long as they turned up on time and behaved as expected within school, his job was done. His life was so stressful that he simply didn't have the bandwidth for anything else.

Now I would want to argue quite strongly that, for a Christian school, that tight setting of boundaries is impossible. And the reason for that comes down to our Christian vision of the human person. For a Christian, education is not a bounded process of inserting knowledge and

information into human beings in order to render them more employable or economically useful. Rather the process of education is about enabling a child to develop into the human being that it is God's purpose for them to be. When we think about education we start with God and with God's purpose for his people. And because we are relational people whose life is defined by the communities and families in which we live, it's not possible to detach the work of our schools from the wellbeing of our communities.

Covid-19 has demonstrated all too vividly the fragility of family and community life in our nation. Here in the north-west the virus is endemic and, in addition to the failure of test and trace, it is not hard to see why. The coronavirus data tables are a poverty-ometer. The infection is rife in areas where there is poor quality housing, where a culture of low pay means that people require many jobs and can unwittingly carry the virus from one to another, where zero-hours contracts mean that people can't afford to isolate and where years of poverty have created the pre-existing health conditions that render the virus lethal. Covid is like a magnifying glass, revealing things that either we fail to see or ignore, in particular long-term and growing inequality. There is a deep sickness in our national life and we are seeing this played out now especially in the more deprived communities across the north of the country.

This stands in stark contrast to God's plan for his people as described to us in the Bible. Again and again we read of a very different vision for human life and human inter-relationship, and one passage that brings this home clearly is the wonderful image of the new Jerusalem in Isaiah chapter 65. In this beautiful section Isaiah looks to the future, he outlines what God is doing amongst his people.

*For I am about to create new heavens  
and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered  
or come to mind.*

Rather than reading out the whole of a rather long passage, let me pick out four characteristics of this renewed world that the prophet describes.

First the New Jerusalem is characterised by **mutual delight between God and his people.**

*<sup>18</sup> But be glad and rejoice for ever  
in what I am creating;  
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,  
and its people as a delight.*

*<sup>19</sup> I will rejoice in Jerusalem,  
and delight in my people;*

It's a beautiful, intimate image of God's closeness to his people. The relationship broken by human sin and selfishness is repaired so that God can delight in his people and his people can rejoice in him. God and his people are so close that he hears even before they call to him, as if life is a permanent state of answered prayer.

Human life is disordered and chaotic when it is centred on itself. We were made by God, and we find our true purpose and identity only in right relationship with him. So the very heart of a renewed and repaired world is the delight that God and his people take in each other.

Second the New Jerusalem is characterised by **restored relationships**.

*The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,  
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!  
They shall not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
says the Lord. (verse 25)*

Isaiah describes a world in which no created thing need hurt another. Once there is right and healed relationship with God then created beings can have right and healed relationships with each other.

The post-Enlightenment church emphasises way too much Christian conversion as something that happens within the mind of the individual. At times it can feel like a private affair between the individual person and their God. But the salvation we see in the scriptures is not so much about individuals as about relationships. Jesus constantly builds community and calls people to belong to each other, typified above all on the cross when he gives his mother to the beloved disciple and so forms the Church. Christians are called into community. Healed, loving, generous relationships with each other are not an adjunct to salvation. They are an integral part of it.

Third the renewed world described by Isaiah is characterised by **healed lives**.

<sup>20</sup> *No more shall there be in it  
an infant that lives but a few days,  
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;  
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,  
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.*

<sup>23</sup> *They shall not labour in vain,  
or bear children for calamity;  
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—*

*and their descendants as well.*

The dignity and preciousness of every human life is acknowledged and no life is wasted. There is no weeping or crying. There is no destructive conflict. There is no poverty or injustice or inequality because the beauty of every person made by God is valued and celebrated. Every single human being matters. Life has a purpose.

And then finally this renewed world is characterised by **the plenteousness of the Land.**

*<sup>21</sup> They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*

*<sup>22</sup> They shall not build and another inhabit;  
they shall not plant and another eat;  
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands*

This is not some airy-fairy vision of a future world where angels sit on clouds and pluck mandolins. It is physical and earthy. It is this creation that is redeemed and made whole. Isaiah speaks of a land of plenty where all can feast and all have enough. But they live in harmony with the created world, not plundering it or despoiling it but valuing it as the source of life and as the place of beauty that God has made available to them.

There can be a temptation in some Christian traditions to understand salvation as escape from an evil world of sin. That meets with problems when it comes to the Christian responsibility to care for the planet, for why should we care for it when Jesus by dying for us has offered us an escape route?

But the Biblical vision is not about escaping creation, but redeeming it. Our vision should be of a planet made whole and a people who live in harmony with it. So often people concerned about ecological issues will terrify us with fear stories about where the planet is headed. As Christians we approach the issue with a hopeful vision of a beautiful world redeemed.

Well that's all very pretty, flowery stuff from Isaiah isn't it? A lovely vision of a world redeemed. The question it leaves us with is this. So what? What has all this talk of lions and lambs and joy and beauty and banquets got to do with the world we inhabit now? What has it got to do with Covid, with poverty and inequality, with Ofsted and Ofqual, with targets and outputs, with teacher recruitment and performance management, with recalcitrant 14 year olds, with drugs and gangs and mental health and poor body image?

And here is the very heart of the challenge for me as a Bishop and for you as Headteachers.

Isaiah describes God's future. Our task is to live that future now. The Christian life is a life lived back to front. Rather than being defined by our past, by our memories and our associations we are defined by our future, or rather by God's future and by what God is going to do next. We live God's future now.

So that means the call on our lives is to strive after a world that reflects the world that God intends for his people as described in Isaiah 65. It is to seek a world in which God delights in his people, in which relationships are restored, in which lives are healed and in which we live in harmony with the land. We may never actually build that world. But it doesn't stop us trying, because through our very efforts we are pointing people to the God in whom all life finds its purpose.

And this means of course that there can be no boundaries. You can't hem in or boundary off the transforming work of God's kingdom. Jesus ministered to the whole person, not to little chunks of them. When he healed the bound woman in Luke 13, he healed her body, her soul, her spirit, her poverty and set her free to sing the song of the Kingdom. When he cast the demon out of the man in the country of the Gadarenes in Mark 5, he changed for ever not just the man's life but that of the community in which he dwelt. When he forgave the woman caught in adultery in John 8, he convicted a whole nation of sin and pointed them all on the path to redemption.

You are called as Headteachers to live God's future now, to make Isaiah's vision a reality today. So simply running a good school (important though that is) is not enough. Simply receiving children at the start of the day, educating them and sending them home again is not enough. Your call reaches beyond the walls of the school into the communities in which you are set. Your task is transformation under Christ.

By now you might be thinking this is terribly unfair. I am speaking to a group of people who are pressured half to death. You have within your schools a zillion and one competing demands on your time. You are managing your places of education through the most serious public health crisis for a century. You are under absurd pressure from government to perform. You have a budget to balance and staff to supervise. And here is some Bishop giving you yet another job and telling you that your task extends beyond the gates of the school to the transformation of whole communities.

Well I don't want to give you any extra work, perhaps no bad thing since none of you has any extra time. What I would like to invite you to do is to think differently about the work you are already doing. I would like to explore your current responsibilities through the lens of Isaiah 65 and see what emerges. What does it mean for you as headteachers to live God's future now? And in particular I want to explore under three headings. The leader you are. The community you build. The students you send.

So first, **the leader that you are**. I wonder if you are truly aware of the massive impact of the role that you play personally in your school and in its community? My old Headmaster was a crotchety,

old-fashioned kind of school leader. He never knew any of our names or visited any of our classrooms. He was distant, aloof and used to lecture us at length in assemblies. He was a lay preacher at the Parish church where I sang in the choir, but he never acknowledged me and used to preach sermons of breath-taking tedium. He was unsmiling and joyless. But the first person I went to see when, at the age of 19, I started considering Ordination was him, and the best advice I ever received was what he gave. He may have been aloof and crotchety, but he had a huge impact on my life.

Or again I visited one of the mosques in Burnley at Eid last year when I bumped into a Bangladeshi woman dressed in the hijab. She told me that she was visiting from Camden Town which was where I served as Parish Priest. 'Oh you must know Mrs Trigg! She said at once. 'We all love Mrs Trigg!' Mrs Trigg was the Headteacher of our small Church of England Primary School, an unashamed and vocal Christian and, unbeknownst to her, a key figure in the huge Camden Bangladeshi Muslim community.

The pressures of the school day, the all-absorbing nature of school life and the insular nature of the school environment mean you will often forget it, but you are absolutely key players in the life of your local community. You have an impact on the your pupils which is bigger by far than you can imagine. You have an influence in your local communities that surpasses any GP, Police Officer, Parish Priest or Local Councillor. And that puts you right on the frontline of Christian witness. You are the place where the Gospel meets the world. And that means that the way you live out and model the Christian life is critical beyond telling. Who you are, how you act, how you are perceived will be for many young people and their families how they perceive the Gospel. The call on your life is to be a person who lives God's future now.

So I want to say three things about the leader you are. First, please attend actively to your own Christian formation. Conversion is a process and not an event. It is a way of life. I spent six years of my life working in Walsingham where much of the ministry was to clergy and their families, and sadly I spent a great deal of time with clergy who were exhausted or burnt out or for whom the light of the Gospel had grown dim. They had worked themselves to death. They were going through the motions. And the first sign of that? They had stopped praying.

Make sure you care for yourselves as Christians. We ensure that our priests have Spiritual Directors, a person to care for their souls whom they go and see three or four times a year for a health-check on their Christian lives, and that strikes me as a good idea for our Headteachers who are equally engaged in the ministry of the Church. Try to make time each day to pray, maybe inviting some staff members to join you. Pilgrimage or retreat can be excellent opportunities to make space to attend actively to your growth in faith. Try not to get too deeply drawn into leadership of the church of which you are a part because you need that church to resource your ministry in school. Living God's future now means being intentional in caring for your own growth as a Christian.

Then second, drawn from the intimacy of that relationship with God, foster a big vision of how you want the world to be. If as a Christian you lose the big picture of God's kingdom and become entirely drawn into the mundane, then you will lose hold of God's call on your life. Imagine your school as God would want it to be. Imagine your community redeemed by God's work. Imagine each child having fulfilled the potential and realised the gifts that God has given them. Look at your staff as God would look at them. Read Isaiah 65 over your school and its neighbourhood and hear how that sounds. Keep the vision strong, for if you lose the vision you will forget your purpose. And actually this is where the strapline of a school can really matter. It should be ambitious and kingdom focussed.

And then third, strengthened by God and by the vision of his Kingdom lead with courage and conviction. In the Ordination of priests we say, 'You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength but only by the grace and power of God.' And that's true also of Headteachers. This is not a job you can do. It's too difficult. You can only do it in God's strength. But think of those in the Bible who acted only in God's strength. David. Elijah. Mary. Peter. Paul. They found a courage and conviction in God that they did not possess themselves. In his strength, don't be afraid to speak up for Christ, to bear witness to faith, to bring about change that grows the Kingdom. Think carefully about the messages and values you want to communicate and ensure that you are living those out yourself. Christian character is massively impactful, and that can begin with what you model.

Then next I'd like to think about the **community you build** as a second way in which you can live God's future now. I remember vividly when the Lottery was first launched and massive attention was paid in the media to the first lottery millionaires. A few months in it was won by a large and rather unfortunate young man from West Yorkshire. The journalists flocked round him and asked the obvious question. 'What are you going to do with the money?' He responded rather wistfully, 'I don't really care about the money. All I want is a girlfriend.'

It is not wealth or status that makes sense of our lives and brings them joy. It is relationships. And that is why, as we have seen, the heart of the saving work of Jesus Christ is the healing of relationships. On the cross Jesus reconciles the relationships between us and the Father. He then sends us as reconcilers. There is no greater kingdom sign than right relationships and healthy community.

A church school is one that is trying to live God's future now. That means a conscious effort to build healthy community. In pointing young people to Jesus Christ, the quality of relationships and the strength of community says a million times more than any words we can ever speak.

Building healthy community means paying real attention to the quality and depth of worship. A Church school is distinctive not because of its values. The Gospel is not about values, it is about a

person, Jesus Christ, and faith in him. It is in worship that Jesus is present, named and adored so it is worship that gives your school its identity. And in worship, as we build relationship with Jesus, we build relationship also with each other. Worship is the workshop of healthy human relationship. Time spent planning worship, staff time committed to worship, young people preparing to lead worship, your own time given to delivering worship is best time that can ever be spent. Good worship will change your school.

Building healthy community means consciously giving time to building good relationships and helping the whole school community to develop an intelligence in understanding relationships work. I have led more youth and children's holidays than I can possibly count. They go well when the adult leaders get on with each other and are enjoying being together. They go wrong when the leaders fall out. It's as simple as that. If you give real attention to the relationships between staff members and within your senior team, you will be role modelling to your pupils how to make relationships work. They will learn more from observing you inter-acting as a staff team than from your words, wise though those words may be. And having just dismissed the values agenda, if values are rooted in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ they can be very helpful in enabling young people to analyse relationships and where they are going right and wrong. If they can leave having developed relational intelligence and able to make difficult relationships work, that is such a gift.

And building health community means valuing every single person as if they were Christ, especially the most troubled and distressed. Isaiah emphasises again and again the preciousness of every human person made by God. In a culture where the value of an individual is usually contingent on their wealth, their connections or the colour of their skin, a school can live the kingdom when it values every person, especially those whose daily lives are rendered joyless by poverty, prejudice or abuse.

The leader you are. The community you build. And finally let me explore how you can live God's future now through **the students you send**. You personally cannot transform the local community. You're too busy. You can do it through the students you send home at the end of each day and the young men and women who leave your school once their education is complete. I often tell congregations that the most important piece of furniture in their church is the door, because the most critical thing they do on Sunday is go home again to share the good news of Jesus Christ. It's the same for a school. The quality of the school is measured when young people head for home or leave. What kind of young person do you want to send into the world?

It's really up to you how you answer that question. Here is how I would answer it if I were a Church school Headteacher.

I'd want to send home young people who live not for self but for service. The culture tells us that happiness comes when you set yourself aspirations and goals, when you have high personal



ambitions, when you decide what you want to achieve and how much you want to earn. It's all about self. Jesus shows us another way. He did so at the table of the Last Supper when he took the towel and washed the feet of his disciples. He modelled for them the path not of self but of service, the path of self-giving love. Jesus made of his life a gift to the world. Those inspired by him don't ask, 'What's in it for me?' They ask, 'What can I give, how can I serve?' What's more as almost every piece of research shows us, the path of service is also the path of happiness.

I'd want to send young people who will care for creation and tend the planet. My generation has destroyed the earth by seeing it as our private property to despoil and plunder at will. Isaiah gives us a very different vision of humanity living in harmony with the planet, one that is achievable. We need this generation to see that they are going to have to clear up the mess that we have made of the earth. And they can model that in the care they take of their own neighbourhood and their own home.

I'd want to send young people who are self-aware. They would know their gifts and want to use them for the good of society. They would have fulfilled their potential academically and have developed a real love of learning and self-development. They would understand how to make and manage healthy relationships. They would respect the needs and integrity of other people. They would be content in their bodies, knowing they were fearfully and wonderfully made by God.

And I'd want to send young people who are open to the work of God in their lives. It is not your job to turn every single one of your pupils into Christians. That would be an abuse of public money. But we do want to open hearts to the possibility of the transcendent, we do want to ask the big questions about purpose and human identity, we do want young people to be aware of the presence of the divine in creation, in art and music and in the poor. We want young people to know the Christian story and know that the Church is a place where they can turn when in need or when seeking or when God's call comes.

Your task, the task of your school, is to live God's future now. That is how we transform the communities in which you are set. You can do that through the leader you are, the community you build, the students you send.

I started by telling you about that school in West View and the rundown, exhausted Headteacher who ran it. When he resigned, we made a bid to take over that school and turn it into a Church of England Aided Comprehensive. It was renamed St Hild's and re-launched in a brand new, wonderful building in 2001.

In the height of lockdown I read about the school in the Daily Media Briefing because pupils were volunteering in big numbers to come into school to make safety visors for NHS staff. I made contact with the Headteacher who could not have been more proud of her pupils and more committed to the difference they were called to make on that estate. That tired, rundown

institution had become a transformed school seeking to transform its community by living God's future now. That's the task we all share.

**+Philip Burnley**

*October 9<sup>th</sup> 2020*