

Education at Leicester Cathedral

A teaching church...

Education has been at the heart of the Christian Church of this country ever since the time of Augustine of Canterbury.

Indeed from those earliest times Churches were almost the only forum for teaching and education. Many monastic establishments flourished as places of learning, not just concerning the Christian faith, but learning from many different disciplines. Local villagers would assemble and be taught by Benedictine, Cistercian or other brands of monk or nun within the confines of a religious community, from the basics of reading and writing onwards.

The records of Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire, a famous and most beautiful ruin of a Cistercian Abbey tells of this work undertaken by its members. And today the monastic community where I was trained, a Benedictine Community at Mirfield in West Yorkshire still sees itself as partly a teaching community in a variety of ways, including their theological training of ordinands.

But this also was always a two way process...

The monks of 7th and 8th centuries in Great Britain were not confined to a closed monastic community, but carried the responsibility of travelling, usually on foot, throughout the surrounding countryside to preach and convert in the villages, but also to be a resource for a wider brief of education. This was especially true of monks from the Celtic monasteries. Regional, or district monasteries were established to better serve an area, partly for the reason of education of the locality. These were designated "minsters", and the term lives on in many place names, such as Warminster, and Axminster.

And so, members of religious communities would receive all sorts of people to teach and would also go out into the locale and beyond to perform the same task.

"Coming and going" ...

In many ways this keys in with the educational basis of the "coming and going" work of this Cathedral. Presently, we do have numbers of schools who come here for tours around the building, using the building as a living resource for the teaching of the faith in a particular and interesting way.

There is the new initiative of pilgrimages for children and young people coming to the Cathedral as their last port of call... journey's end in this special place.

Conversely, and again using the early monastic image, I feel privileged to be able to go out and teach not just Readers or Ordinands or similar folk with specifically theological themes, but also to teach young bright minds in a variety of educational subjects next door at Leicester Grammar School.

"Coming and going" ... the place of the Cathedral today as a place of educational "coming and going" is a central theme of its everyday life.

In Leicester though we have a unique opportunity to engage with different cultures and religions in an educational way beneficial to all.

These words by the theologian Hans Kung summarise directly and succinctly what could become the cathedral's approach to education in terms of the other faiths and cultures hereabouts.

"No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.

No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.

No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religions."

Although the phrases need quite an amount of unpacking, the truth of what he says is plain enough.

"No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.

No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.

No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religions."

The last two phrases hold a real steer for the foundation of this Cathedral.

Here education must be holistic. Education cannot pretend that Christians can simply work away in their own compartment of life. It must therefore be outward-looking, engaging with those of other faiths and none in this place of "common ground". The Cathedral although faithful in the teaching and proclamation of its own faith could well be the place to engage with, learn from, value and be educated by the other faith centres of our culture.

Paradoxically, in the Gospel reading for today, the Samaritan who came back to thank Jesus for his healing was one a despised culture who was banned from worship in the central temple of Jerusalem. The Jews often and wilfully misunderstood these people who had been brought into Israel by the Assyrians in 721 BC and after to fill the cultural gap following the conquest of Israel. They were always seen as pagans who were not quite the right penny in so many different ways. Engagement with the Samaritans...for the Jews of Jesus time therefore... "no way". Except Jesus in his radical way treated them as human beings from which the purist Jew could do well to learn. I could get carried away here... but time doesn't allow!

Our Christian education too must be "life-long", never supposing that we've learnt enough about our faith to put a full-stop firmly in place. Education in this Cathedral must be keen to raise the questions people ask, and seek to answer them. It must root itself in an exploration of the rich treasures of Christian teaching and

spirituality, so that confident Christians can themselves become confident citizens within a multi-cultural, multi-faith context.

We do this in so many ways already beginning with CHALK, through our teenage CONNECT, through Dean's questions, through House Groups, through the casual visitor who comes to a recalcitrant Canon and asks Why?... How?... What?...

And this is why welcomer ministry is so vital here. This is why the casual visitor apart from being welcomed and cared for should feel free to ask the question of enquiry.

In all of the churches where I was a priest, I instigated a "Y" book.

People were invited to write questions in the book either anonymously or by name which would be answered in the same book and these people would be encouraged to return to at least read the answer.

It also formed the basis of a "Y" Column in the monthly magazine.

This leads me on to the final point.

Yesterday, 500 people came to the Cathedral, many of whom were Pastoral Assistants, Readers and Evangelists. The theology of the occasion, from the Acts of the Apostles, was grounded in the theme of returning to the Apostle's teaching, being fed, reengaged and then being sent out into the world again to preach, care, and teach themselves.

The theology is unassailable... the sense of Apostleship finds its focus in the Bishop of the Diocese within the Mother Church of the Diocese where the Bishop's seat is to found.

We have now moved on from the sense that it was a nice thing to do for the separate ministries to come here, have a nice service and go away again within annual events which ought to be done. This was a service where the ministry of the whole was engaged with within a real sense of shared mission and development, based on the returning of many to the "feet of the apostles" for the apostles teaching.

This in turn worked in with those 18 or so people who had been taught and who were being sent for the first time, who next year themselves will return to the centre and to the apostles teaching.

Ministries which come and go from the Cathedral, a place engaged with education as part of its reason for being.