

To be a Disciple

The sermon given at the All-Age Communion Service, on 8th September 2019 (Education Sunday) by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Luke 14:25-33

"Maaam I don't want to go to school." "Don't be so silly, Janet - you get out of bed right now. If you don't get moving you're going to be late for school. Your friends will miss you. And anyway you're the head teacher."

Not everybody likes school. Some of us here this morning have probably gone to school for the first time this week and I hope it was a good experience, I hope you had a good time. But not everybody likes school all the time. Sometimes not even the teachers like school, so on this education Sunday there's a chance for us to stop and ask, "Why do we put ourselves in our children through it? What's the point of school and college and university? What do we think education is for?" I don't know what you think - any of the current people on the receiving end of the school system - what do you think school is for? *[Jonathan takes microphone to visit people in the congregation]*

"Edward: Boosting your knowledge."

Sounds good. What else is school for do you think, or college or uni?

"Giving parents spare time." "Paying the bills" somebody said. Yes, we're getting closer to it now, aren't we?

All sorts of things that people look for from the school system: is it just a babysitting service? Do we expect schools to bring up our children for us? And I guess when parents talk about a good school, what they often mean is a school where their children are going to be reasonably happy, and where they get good exam results. But is that the same as giving a good education? People think exam results are very important because they help you to go on and get a job. And of course that is really important, that we can earn a living. But if education is only about helping you to get a job, then that is

seeing it just as a kind of tool that you have to have before you can prise open the tin of life's golden syrup.

The bigger question is surely, "What do you do with your life once you've got all these qualifications? What are you going to give your life to? A real education helps you to answer that question, "What am I going to dedicate my life to? And in the Gospel reading, Jesus offers a very different view of education. He's speaking about how to be a disciple, a word which means literally 'a learner'. The disciples were called to learn and they were to do it not by going to school or uni and sitting in lessons or lectures, but they learned by spending time with Jesus, talking with him, eating with him, sharing their lives with him, so that they could copy him, and make his way of living, their own. They wanted to learn from him because they saw something really attractive in him: they recognised that Jesus was someone who knew how to live well and he seemed so full of love and life, that they thought, "I want to be like that."

But in this passage Jesus has some disturbing things to say to the crowd who have started to follow him and who think it's all going to be easy. He warns them it's not going to be easy at all. And he says a series of disturbing things: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and even life itself, cannot be my disciple; whoever does not carry the cross and follow me, cannot be my disciple; and if you do not give up all your possessions you cannot be my disciple".

I don't know about you but I find that sounds really scary. But it's part of a good education, because what Jesus is doing here is he's giving his disciples a real meaty challenge, and people like challenges - it brings out the best in us. I don't think he's really saying you have to reject your family or sell all your possessions or be crucified in order to follow him. but he is challenging those who wants to be disciples that they have to be single-minded about it; they have to be willing to make sacrifices in order to do it properly.

So a good education will ask us, "What are you willing to dedicate your life to? What are you willing to make sacrifices for? And what are you willing to pursue as the most

important thing in your life?" Jesus's disciples were committing themselves to the kingdom of God; to living as people committed to welcoming strangers, including outsiders; showing forgiveness and generosity; speaking out against all kinds of injustice and unfairness. And doing all of that because they wanted to stay close to Jesus. It wasn't easy for them. It was costly and difficult. But it meant their lives were full of adventure and energy and purpose. They didn't get rich but they discovered how to live well, because they responded to Jesus's challenge to follow him, whatever the cost.

When President John F. Kennedy announced the NASA space programme in the early 1960s, he made a speech promising to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. He said, "We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon, not because it is easy but because it is hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills." And he gave the American people a big vision to excite them and energise them.

So I don't think education is just about getting skills and passing exams. It's about looking for a challenge and finding a vision that those skills can serve. It's about harnessing our learning to a greater goal and purpose. Jesus summoned his disciples to follow him and base their lives on his, not because it was easy, but because it was true and because it promised a way of living well.

So on this education Sunday, may I ask, "How are you going to use your learning? What is the challenge that you are seeking to respond to? And what is that vision to which you will devote your life?"

Reading Texts

Jeremiah 18:1-11

¹ The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ² "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." ³ So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴ The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. ⁵ Then the word of the Lord came to me: ⁶ Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷ At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. ⁹ And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. ¹¹ Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

Luke 14:25-33

²⁵ Now large crowds were travelling with him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." ³¹ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he cannot, then, while the other is

still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.