

Diocesan Advisors' Conference

University of Warwick

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'What is education for?'

Introduction

My answer to the Conference question, 'What is education for?', is simply this: education is for the raising of human beings to their full dignity. One might call this an anthropological answer, a humanist answer. It is indeed. Education is about the lifting of people to their full dignity as human beings. It is about the humanising of humanity: providing space for young and old to become fully human, to grow into their true human identity and exercise authentic human activity. It is also, though, a theological answer: a humanist answer that is divinised by the Christian definition of humanity.

The full dignity of humanity, Christianly understood

What is this Christian understanding of what it is to be a human being? It is rooted in the ancient Jewish conviction that men and women are made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1.26). Long ago, in an experience familiar to most of us today, a Jewish poet and song writer looked up the night sky and felt very small:

When I look to the heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them? (Psalm 8.3).

His answer was that God had made them only 'a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honour'. This is our status in the vast inexhaustibly immense expanse of materiality: just a little lower than God, the creator of all things visible and invisible. Our glory and honour is to be made not only in the image of God, to — in some creaturely way — look like God, bearing the stamp of God's nature and character, but to share in his likeness and act like God, to do the sort of things that God does. By an extraordinary gracious generosity we are 'given dominion over the works of God's hands' and all things are put under our

feet' (Psalm 8.5–8). According the psalmist it is in the sharing of God's sovereignty that God's majesty is displayed most fully 'in all the earth' (Psalm 8.9).

Christian Faith takes this Jewish conception of humanity and of divinity at its word and stakes its greatest claim to truth and builds its highest contribution to human self-understanding on the conviction that God's word about God and about humanity became flesh in Jesus, the Jewish child. The God who shares divine sovereignty with humanity comes to share the full reality of human life in Jesus Christ. In the imagery of one of the earliest Christian hymns (most probably a Jewish-Christian hymn), the God who created humanity in the image and likeness of God now 'empties himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness' *and* (remember I said the *full reality of human life*) 'being found in human likeness, humbles himself and becomes obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross' (Philippians 2.7–8).

A lot lies between the stories of Creation and Christmas — the saga that the Psalmist knew only too well: the fall of humanity from the full dignity of its identity and the corruption of its god-like activity through erosive and corrosive personal, inter-personal, communal, societal and international failings. And so the God who creates with extraordinary generosity comes with even more extraordinary generosity to re-create, redeem, revive and renew the full dignity of human beings, to restore the glory of their identity and the honour of their activity. The Christian poet and song writer describes how the human nature inhabited by God in Jesus Christ is exalted to the highest place and given the name that is above every name (Philippians 2.9). Consistent with the ancient psalmist's vision of God sharing his sovereignty, the New Testament is clear that although only Jesus is the Lord, those who follow him to the place he is preparing for them will be made like him when God completes the work that God has begun (John 14.1–3; 1 John 3.2). Then, according to the heavenly visions of the last book of the Bible, in a glorious celebration of the diversity of humanity, we will bring 'the glory and honour of the nations' into the redeemed city and sit and eat at the table of the Lord (Revelation 19.9; 21.22–27).

All this means that the pattern for human life is the pattern of God's life lived out in the life of Jesus Christ. In this most attractive and authentic of human lives we

see the life of God played out in human form and we see human life played out as it is meant to be — in the image and likeness of God. Hence, the measure of effective education is, in the words of another ancient Christian writer, nothing less than ‘the measure of the full stature of Christ’ (Ephesians 4.13). That is why I cannot think of a better quotation for you to have on your Conference programme than the words that you have chosen spoken by Donald Coggan: ‘The highest education is that which brings the student face to face, not simply with something great but with someone great, namely Jesus Christ’.

I am in danger of getting carried away and losing you with flurries of theological prose. Let me then take a leaf from your Conference title and summarise with the traditional pedagogic method of catechesis.

- What is education for?
It is for the raising of human beings to their full dignity.

- What is the full dignity of human beings?
It is the full dignity of identity and activity in the image and likeness of God.

- What is the measure of this sort of human life and action — what does it look like in practice?
The measure of this sort of human life and work is the measure of the full stature of Christ.

- What, then, is the full meaning of the humanising of humanity?
It is the divinizing of humanity, not in the sense of becoming divine but in the sense of being raised truly into the life of God’s love so that we may share fully in the work of God’s love.

Being educated into the image and likeness of God

If all of this is still sounding a bit theoretical, let me tell you about some people, ancient and modern, and about myself, somewhere in between. My two ancients — though they feel very contemporary, you have probably had them in your class — are Mary Magdalene and Peter. Mary was messed up. There is no textual evidence that she was a sex worker (as has often been thought) but she was in a bad way, oppressed on multiple levels. That was until she met Jesus. Luke tells us that he cast seven demons from her. That is Luke's way of saying Mary was *really messed up* and that Jesus rescued her and restored her. Evil (there is no other word for it) had robbed her dignity from her. Jesus returned it to her — in spades, spades full of the redeemed creation that was breaking into the old, ruinous creation through his resurrection from the dead. He met her weeping in the garden, called her by name and then sent her to be the first to tell the world that he had risen from the dead, that humanity had been freed from its chains of captivity to forms of human living that are closer to death than to the life that God intends for us. "I have seen the Lord" (John 20.18), she told the disciples in the voice of one lifted into the full dignity of humanity. Maybe that is why the gospel writers delighted in describing her as Mary Magdalene — because Magdala, presumably the place from which Mary hailed, meant in Aramaic, her mother tongue, 'great' and 'magnificent', something that was 'elevated'!

My other ancient is Peter — and you have certainly had him in your class: confident to the point of precociousness, skilled with hand and mind, and of big heart but always underperforming and letting you down at the last moment. Encountering Jesus was an education for him as well. Like the very best of teachers, the first time Jesus saw him (he was called 'Simon' at the time) he could see that there was more to him than met most people's eyes. He called him by a new name — Rock. He knew that, contrary to impressions, even the impressions Peter created of himself, Peter could be counted on, that he had an inner strength as yet untapped. Jesus called him by that new name even after he had failed him at Jesus' hour of greatest need because he knew that Peter's heart was filled with the stuff of which he could build his church — the rock of love.

I said I would say something about myself. In year 4 (though we did not call it that in those days) I had a teacher called Mrs Hellmore. (Please do not get me

wrong if your name is Hellmore. I know you are more like a Heavenmore.) My year in 4 with Mrs Hellmore, though, became more and more hellish for me. It became so bad that I forgot how to spell my own name. I hated year 4 and I hated myself. I took it out on someone called Michael. I made life hell for him. God forgive me. I was damaged property for years 5 and 6. I will not bore you with the proof. You know the stories too well. But I will tell you about year 7: first year in the big school. It was not the school I wanted to be at but I knew I was not good enough to be anywhere else. I still hated English. I had learnt to spell my name again but not much more. There was something, though, about Mr Campbell that got my brain into gear and something about the way he was in the classroom that grew my confidence. I knew it was about to be dashed, though, when he announced that we were to write a poem. The mere thought of it petrified me. Somehow Mr Campbell managed to move me out of the headlights of my fear and I put pen to paper — about a puddle of all things. 'Reflecting splashed faces'. That is all that I can remember of my poem but I remember liking it; and so did Mr Campbell. He gave me A ++ and wrote words alongside my little puddle poem that lifted me up and took me out of the hell that had clung to me and lifted me a little closer to heaven. My dignity as a human being was being restored.

My final story is of some slum children in New Delhi in India. They were children with no hope; without hope, at least, until a remarkable Christian NGO called Asha, which means Hope in Hindi, came into their lives. Asha was founded by Kiran Martin, a highly able medical doctor who combines a Pentecostal type expectation in the activity of God with the shrewdness of a political activist and the strategic educational vision of a John Milton, Thomas Arnold, Joshua Watson, or William Temple. There is not much dignity in a slum if it is left to itself and what little dignity of life is left does not reach its children. They are destined for a life of poverty, disease, and ignorance, and for an early death. Asha did not leave the slums and the children of the slums to themselves. It stepped in and brought hope. Over a generation the children of Asha's slums have been raised up and dignified. They have been educated. Last month, Julia Gillard, the Australian Prime Minister visited one of Asha's slums to celebrate the

extraordinary fact that 700 slum children have now passed through Asha's Higher Education Programme to graduate from Delhi University.

I will return to Kiran Martin in a moment. First, I want to underline the point I was trying to make earlier — that our dignity as human beings made in the image and likeness of God concerns our identity and activity. In formal theological terms, God is pure being and pure act. When the image of God is restored in human beings they become secure in themselves, like God, and secure in their dealings with others, again like God. That sounds rather static and tame. Let us put more dynamically and adventurously: they delight in themselves and overflow with longing for others and excitement for the world. These two dimensions are built into Jesus' way of making disciples. He calls people to be with him, to be reclaimed by God's patient love for them, and then he sends them out to take their part in God's reclaiming of the world (Mark 3.13–15). Is not something like this built into the collection of Latin words that lie behind our English word of education — a double meaning of being reared or brought up (*educare*) and brought out and led forth (*educere*)?

I would make two points on the back of this observation. First, notions of education that define its purpose in terms of the betterment of individuals, as an end itself, fall a long way short of the idea of raising human beings to their full dignity in the way that I have been trying to describe. It is not that education is disinterested in the self-fulfillment of individuals. It is rather that education into our fullest humanity is an education into a form of life that finds its fulfillment in the betterment of others. The abundant life that Jesus demonstrated and offered to those who stepped into his way of living was — and remains — a way of living that seeks abundant life for all. Education is not only about changing ourselves and those in our educational care. It is about changing the world through you and me and those we seek to educate.

Second — and this follows on — there is nothing intrinsically wrong with notions of education fitting people for the world of work. God works: God, as we have seen, creates, redeems and completes. Human beings raised into their full dignity will want to take their part in the economy of God with its industrial, commercial, legal, medical, administrative aspects for the betterment of the world. What is debilitating and destructive of the human dignity is the reduction

of human beings to industrial units honed for material productivity rather than co-workers with God, called and commissioned to shape God's world for a just and joyous life for all its inhabitants.

Raising human beings to their full dignity through the deep mystery of love

I said that I would return to Kiran Martin. I do so now and I will leave the last words to her. That is because I want to end by suggesting how the sort of purposes for education that I have been describing might be achieved. How are human beings raised to their full dignity? There is only one answer in Christian terms. Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God through the power of God's love. It is that same power of love that restores the image and likeness of God in us and completes our conformity with Christ at the end of history as we know it and the beginning of a new sort of history where every tear is wiped away and where the lion and the lamb lie down together in peace. The sort of love that the Judeo-Christian tradition defines as love is the love that sticks with children in the slums. The mystery of its power was movingly described by Kiran Martin in these words two years ago on the eve of her birthday.

As I turn 51 tomorrow, my heart is filled with pride at the thought of the astonishing success of nearly 300 Asha children from the slums in their high school exams. To me, their lives glow with the beauty of the rarest, brightest of gems. An education at Delhi University that many of them will now be able to obtain, will serve as a gateway to such exciting new opportunities. They will receive the chance to be taught by top experts in their fields, some of the best and most knowledgeable people in our country. This stimulation will encourage them to think, ask questions, explore new ideas, and grow and develop in marvellous ways. The level of respect that they will gain will be a testament to their levels of intelligence and tireless devotion.

When I try to comprehend this many splendoured miracle of God, I am reminded that these children have suffered from poverty through not one, but many generations. Not just financial poverty, never having had money to purchase goods and services, but deep emotional poverty, the hardest of all. Until Asha came into their lives, it was hard for them to even choose and control emotional responses. They had no stamina to withstand difficult emotional situations and feelings. Many were physically weak from poor nutrition. They did not have the mental abilities and acquired skills such as reading, writing and computing, to deal with daily life, since most of them never went to school. They had poor support systems, no role models and no access to a nurturing adult.

What has happened can only be explained by the deep mystery of the power of love. A love that makes room for them to deposit all their hurts and worries. A love that is large enough for all their joys and sorrows. A love that understands what the child cannot say. A love that is instructional, unconditional and forever.

I am beginning to understand that the strength of love is greater than all natural laws. It is the fuel that enables a normal human being to do the impossible. It sees the miracle that is invisible to others.

Today I would like to pay tribute to my team whose deep devotion, kind precepts and wise counsel caused the clouds of darkness to dissipate from the hearts of these lovely children. May our love continue to nourish them and help them to grow, prosper and reach great spiritual, intellectual and emotional heights. May they always be able to count on us for the things that matter most of all.

I ask God to bless my hands that are folded in prayer for them today. May my hands ever be strong as they guide, and never ever be too far for a child to reach.

On reflection, perhaps we should all have the last word, and it be: **Amen.**

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