Fourth Isaac Armitage Lecture Setting the Vision: The Calling of the Christian Teacher in the Twenty First Century World Shore School, Friday 19th September 2008

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Introduction

I feel very privileged to have been invited to give the 2008 Isaac Armitage lecture. I have read the lectures of my predecessors, Andrew Cameron, Grant Maple and Simon Longstaff and am aware of the enormous challenge I face in following in their footsteps. I would like to thank the headmaster, Dr Timothy Wright, for the invitation and chaplains Nick Foord and Paul Dudley for their support in my preparation. I just pray that the thoughts of a humble Brit will be of some benefit in your deliberations on the mission of the Anglican school.

I also feel very privileged because my job with the Transforming Lives project has enabled me to work extensively with Christian teachers in thinking about the nature of their vocation. I have watched with great interest, although from afar, the developing work of Ian Keast and John Scott in the Anglican Education Commission as they have recruited and educated Christian teachers. My privilege is to have a parallel role in Britain where I am employed to champion the significant mission-role of the Christian teacher in the church at large. I hope that some of you might visit our website.

Initially the sponsors of the Transforming Lives Project were interested in recruiting more Christians into teaching. They valued teaching as an important mission activity of the church and felt that the more Christians there were in the profession the better. And of course they are right!

However the Project steering group was concerned that there is still little understanding of what it means to be an effective, holistic Christian teacher in contemporary Britain; by this I mean someone whose professional work is shaped by gospel thinking rather than someone who simply attends church on Sunday but whose professional work is shaped by the prevailing culture, which at best echoes its Christian heritage and at worst has lost all touch with it. So we persuaded the sponsor to allow us to do some missiological work developing and communicating a clear message about the role of the Christian teacher in contemporary society. What does it mean to be a mission-shaped teacher? This work ends in December this year. I am delighted to have the opportunity of the Armitage lecture to share some of the results of our deliberations as we reflect together on the vocation of the Christian teacher. My purpose then this evening is to address the question "what does it mean to have the vocation to teach in an Anglican school?"

The Sacred-Secular Divide

As a preliminary I want to make a few remarks about what has been dubbed the SSD virus by Bryan Cowling, who describes it as "the pervasive belief that some parts of

our life are not really important to God – work, school, leisure – but anything to do with prayer, church or chapel services, church based activities and evangelism is." Let me illustrate from the story of a student of mine who used to be a youth worker in a church and then became convinced that God was calling him to be a religious education teacher in a community school. He was criticised by fellow Christians for "abandoning God's work". "Why would he want to teach in a school when he has a unique opportunity to work with those in church who want to hear God's word?" That, sadly, is the SSD virus.

In my work with the Church of England, I have concluded that we struggle with this virus. On the one hand, as good Protestants we are committed to the priesthood of all believers. But when it comes to discussions of vocation there is ambivalence about whether the concept applies exclusively to a call to church-based ministry (particularly ordination) or whether it applies to all Christians in their life's work. For example, this quote from the conclusion of a recent Church of England report reflects the challenge:

"We suggested that such language as 'Monday morning ministry' or 'ministry in the home', to refer to a Christian's daily walk of discipleship, their witness and acts of charity, is not helpful. A term is needed to mark out the core tasks of the Church, and those who are commissioned to carry them out, from the life of Christian discipleship that should characterize all Christians at all times. Ministry we propose refers to specific, God-given work for the kingdom of God, work that is assigned or acknowledged by the Church." (My emphasis.)

Allow me to relate two true stories that I suggest illustrate the consequence of such thinking.

In March 2006, I attended a major Church of England conference to celebrate the Church's mission work through its schools. I was in a group where one headteacher told this story. She was delighted about her church's new-found commitment to mission and was an enthusiastic participant in the preliminary audit to identify current mission activity through the parish. So she was somewhat bemused when her form was returned to her by the vicar; it hadn't been completed properly. The problem was her answer to the question "Please describe your current involvement in church mission". Her response had been "I am head teacher in a primary school". "That's not what the question is looking for" explained the vicar. "We want to know about things you do for the church, not your job." Her school was the Church school in the parish.

My second story comes from Alison Brown who now works as the Deputy Schools' Director in the Diocese of Derby. Here she describes her discovery, as a young mother, of her vocation to teach and the response of her church.

"I had a real sense of excitement in a classroom and an odd certainty that this was the place for me. It did take time to think carefully about my calling though. A close friend and I, another Mum, helped each other a lot as we went through a process of testing the idea. She ended up being ordained and I decided to teach, but we both felt our respective callings very strongly. The irony is that on the Sunday before I started my teacher training and she went off to begin her ordination training, only one of us was called out to be prayed for in church. I leave you to guess who."

The danger in seeking to distinguish between the concept of church-recognised

law, tolerance, equal treatment of all, respect for this country and its shared

concept of Christian vocation. The primary calling is to faithfulness to God. It is to seek that our entire life should be an expression of communion with God. Our secondary callings, and there may be many of them over a lifetime, are the means by which we express that faithfulness and include our career(s). In this sense the vocation to teach is a secondary calling. To treat one's job as one's primary calling is to mistake its significance. To change one's job is not to deny one's primary calling.

Secondly, drawing on Parker Palmer, they introduce the concepts of fit and fulfilment as central to discovering our secondary callings in life. . "Finding fulfilment in our work occurs if the particular tasks of the job fit our skills and competence" (2005, p15). By fit they mean the match between a person's gifts, personality and abilities and the requirements of a job. By fulfilment they mean the nebulous but important idea that one's passions in life are matched in the job that one does. Where there is both fit and fulfilment there is a secondary calling, or a vocation. That is when one's heart sings.

In using the concepts of fit and fulfilment, Kline and Hartnett are echoing the substantial work of the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf on work. Volf puts forward what he calls a pneumatological understanding of work, by which he means that a

because if the Church isn't helping teenagers to understand their Christian vocation, then we will have missed the boat by the time they are young adults. Considerable effort is invested by the Church in identifying and developing those who have a calling to ordained ministry. But what about our teachers (and doctors and business people and journalists)? This certainly requires public recognition of a teacher's calling, through commissioning services and other strategies. It also requires a strategy for working with those who are in process of discerning their calling. This

Miroslav Volf again:

"A theological interpretation of work is valid only if it facilitates transformation of work toward ever-greater correspondence with the coming new creation" (p. 83)

what we may call building for God's kingdom." (p205)

The relevance of all this for Christian teachers is that they are literally "agents of transformation" (Wright, 2007, p214), kingdom builders who shape the future through their work with pupils. As Miroslav Volf puts it, teachers work is of eternal value for their pupils because "it leaves an indelible imprint on their personalities" (2001 p. 98). Christian teachers carry forward the mission of the church, are outposts of God's Kingdom and co-workers with God in the world through the work of teaching and learning. That is what makes it a vocation.

Transformation in Teaching

There can be little doubt that teachers can make a huge difference to their pupils' lives. The weekly Times Educational Supplement in England carries a feature where well-known personalities reflect on one of their teachers when they were at school. It is humbling to read. Always there is a deep sense of gratitude for a very significant contribution; often one which changes the direction of that person's life.

One of the profoundly significant insights that comes out of Tom Wright's book is that all the things that Christians do that make a positive difference to other people's lives, that promote a form of life that resonates with the values of the Kingdom of God, that promote human flourishing and well-being, have eternal value. So, for example, the headteacher friend of mine who went to great pains to break the nicotine addiction of many of his pupils by arranging for professional intervention was contributing something of eternal consequence to these young people. It is not just the visiting evangelist who saves souls that is doing that. To transform people's well-being through one's work is an integral part of having a Christian vocation.

Sometimes people question whether this approach is actually distinctively Christian. Could not people from other religious traditions have come up with it? The answer is yes - and no.

The assumption behind the question is that for an approach to be distinctively Christian it must be uniquel 2 (n) - 0 . 5 2 6 2 2 rnujstetiftfranu 1 .09f&3:11 (t) 3 . 3 8 3 6 6 (f) - 0