



The Seventh Sunday of Easter
17 May 2015

As You Have Sent Me, So I Have Sent Them

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Ezekiel 36.24-28; 1 John 5.9-13; John 17.6-19

There's a classic dream that almost everyone has. Schoolchildren have it: they're walking into an exam and they suddenly realise they've not been to classes for the last year. Actors have it: they're on stage and they have no idea of their lines. And teachers have it: they're teaching Geography but they know nothing whatsoever about Geography. Except teachers somehow have it worse, because added to the sense of exposure is a more sinister feeling that they're standing in front of a class of pupils who mistrust, dislike, and perhaps even despise them.

Even those many who claim teachers have it easy with their apparently long holidays and short working days are secretly in awe of those who, day after day, go into a classroom and confront full-on our society's profound confusion about education. Back in 1979 Pink Floyd chanted, 'We don't need no education, we don't need no thought control.' It epitomised a still-widespread teenage grunt that regards education not as a welcome gift but as an unjust imposition.

Our society isn't at all sure how to think about education. At one extreme is the rather sixties idea that education means simply drawing out of the boundless storehouse of each individual the wondrous depths that are there. At the other extreme is the rather soulless idea that the young mind is a blank slate and it's the teacher's job to transfer as much information onto it as possible before anyone notices. Between those two extremes lie two similar but subtly different notions. One is the idea of training – the learning of particular skills suited to adult life and the workplace, skills that equip the trainee to adapt to new circumstances with alacrity and confidence. The other is the idea of formation – the chiselling of character through resilient emergence from setback and disappointment to grow in wisdom and virtue.

All of these are part of the imagination and rhetoric of education today, even though sometimes they contradict one another; but my sense is that what draws teachers into the profession is something beyond all four of those notions. It's the image of giving a pupil a key that unlocks a whole universe, beyond and above and within and beneath the standard, everyday world they would otherwise perceive. It's just a glimpse of what the disciples felt around Jesus – that thrilling and irresistible sense that this is what life is, this is what the world is, this is what I am, this is who God is. To be a teacher is to be called to give people that key.

So how do you go about giving people that key? There are all sorts of theories and formulas, but what I find the simplest and the best goes like this. You start with people who have low interest and low ability, not because they're bored or stupid but because they're new to the subject; your job is to direct them, to give them clear instructions and roles and tasks and vocabulary so they get a handle on what you're about. Then if all goes well you find you have people with high interest yet still low ability. They're into it, but still lack the tools and knowledge to put their interest to work. Your job is to coach them so they contribute their ideas and suggestions and to supervise them so through listening, advice, encouragement and example they can practise and get better at what they're doing. Then thirdly you find you have people who have high ability but maybe their interest is waning a little. The real work of the teacher here is to get inside people's motivations and build confidence through praise and persuasion. When someone looks back and credits a teacher for believing in them, this is the stage they're referring to. Finally, if all is well, you have people who

have high interest and high ability, and they're ready to take up the reins and ideally grow into even greater knowledge and skill than their teacher; besides mentoring with decision-making and encouraging reflective practice, the teacher's main job is to let the baby eagle leave the nest and fly.

Directing, coaching, supporting and delegating: they're often thought of as forms of good management, but I see them as the shape of good teaching. If you think about the people who were or are your best teachers, the chances are they were with you in all four of these ways. If you've known what it feels like to be thrown in the deep end too quickly and set up to fail then you've been propelled into stage four without anyone helping you sufficiently with stages one, two and three. If you've ever got cross with someone because you feel you've given them instructions and they've not done what you wanted them to do, maybe you've concentrated on stages one and four and neglected the coaching and support that are the vital way to get from one to the other.

In case this all seems a bit formulaic, think about Jesus' practice as a teacher. At the start of the gospels he does a lot of directing. He offers the Beatitudes, he describes the kingdom of God, he teaches in parables, he heals people as tangible signs of heaven on earth. The confused and foolish disciples start to get the message. Then he starts to do a bit more coaching. He sends the disciples out on mission trips. He equips them and advises them and debriefs them afterwards. Then as in today's gospel passage he does quite a bit of supporting. He anticipates a time when he will no longer be with them and talks more intensely about what it will mean for them to be clothed with the Spirit and given power to do the things he has been doing. Finally on Ascension Day he delegates: he steps aside, or in his case, he steps above, and he leaves the disciples to carry on the embodiment and proclamation of the gospel. Jesus is the perfect teacher. He gives his disciples the keys to the kingdom, enabling them to discover through him what the world is, what life is, who they are and who God is. He directs, coaches, supports and delegates. He has the words of eternal life.

Ascension Day really is the scariest and most remarkable day in the Christian year. Given that we've seen how God isn't put off by the lowliness of our creaturehood or the depth of our sin, and comes as a baby at Christmas anyway; given that God isn't daunted by the horror of rejection or the prison of death, but comes back to us in the risen Christ on Easter Day, you wonder why Christ can't just hang around with us forever. You can't get a true sense of Ascension Day unless you've had that experience of being tossed in the deep end and set up to fail and have known the panic of feeling alone and way out of your depth. There's a story of a parish secretary who wrote all the vicar's sermons and never got the credit and finally could stand it no longer so one day the vicar was in the pulpit and said 'this is an example of the most complex feature of the human condition as expressed by the great fourth century theologian...' whereupon the vicar turned the page and saw a blank sheet of paper marked only with the words, 'You're on your own now.' Ascension Day is the day the disciples feel the same panic. They're looking at a blank page where Jesus' words used to be. 'You're on your own now.' You can feel them looking to left and right and wondering how they can manage the kingdom of God now it's left to them. Yikes.

In their heads the disciples can look back and realise Christ has been the perfect teacher. He's directed. He's coached. He's supported. And now he's delegated. Fair enough. But in their hearts and guts the disciples are beside themselves. They feel like the teacher in front of the class who never learnt the subject, the actor on stage who never learned their lines, the pupil in the exam who never went to any lessons. But deeper than that, even if they could remember what to do, it's not the same. Jesus didn't come to bring a message. Jesus was the message: God with us. The disciples weren't inspired by an idea: they were transformed by a person. And now he's gone. They miss him with an ache so deep it's paralysing, a yearning so profound it's transfixing, a longing so overwhelming it obliterates all rational thought.

We know how the story ends. Ten days after the Ascension the disciples are given something that's not in the education manuals, they discover a stage beyond directing, coaching, supporting and delegating, they find a dimension no other form of learning or formation or training can come anywhere near: they receive the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is well beyond even the best teacher or the most outstanding school. Pentecost is the difference between what's possible through the best exercise of human reason and what's made possible by God's grace and the gift of faith.

But Pentecost is not yet. Pentecost is still a week away. This is the Sunday between the glory of Ascension and the gift of Pentecost. On this Sunday we experience something different to all the other Sundays of the year. We've said goodbye to Jesus but we haven't yet received the Spirit. On 51 Sundays of the year we celebrate the presence of God, God with us in Jesus through the Holy Spirit. But just this one Sunday we feel that ache, that longing, that yearning, that desperate insight into what it's like to be without God. It's scary. It's humbling. It's harrowing.

But it shows us something tremendously important. It shows us what God feels like most of the time. This one Sunday of the year, bereft of Jesus on Ascension Day and not yet clothed with the Spirit at Pentecost, we sense we don't know how to get through to God. Every Sunday of the year God wonders how to get through to us. This ache, this longing, this yearning – this is how God feels all the time, when we scorn, betray, wander, reject, discard. And that insight – that window into the heart of God – points us to the true meaning of education. We've talked about eliciting our hidden depths, about information transfer, about training and about formation. We've picked up the key to the wondrous garden of delights and entered a whole new world of discovery and amazement. But this Sunday, this vantage-point on God's unrequited longing for us, shows us the ultimate goal of education: conversion. Education brings us to the moment when we come face to face with God, and find, not an angry judge, not a merciless tyrant, not an absent-minded uncle, but a pining, aching, longing, yearning heart seeking to be with us now and always, and willing to go to any lengths to make it so. The names of those lengths are Jesus and the Holy Spirit. This is the Sunday we imagine what it would be like to be without either. How we realise our need of both!

And that is the moment of our conversion.