

Chaplaincy Matters October 2010

Please send comments, questions or suggestions to
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- 1) A Diary Moment: JUNE 2011
- 2) Chilean Miners
- 3) A retiring Headmaster reflects
- 4) Early thoughts on Advent and Christmas

1) For your diaries:

Your prayers and presence are requested.

16th-18th June

Liverpool Hope University

A unique conference bringing together all who are committed to and concerned about Christian education in our nation

The 200th anniversary of the National Society, 200 years since the birth of Nathaniel Woodward. We at the SCA are not having our usual School Chaplains' Conference so we can all go to this one instead. Please put the dates in your diary – more details to follow

2) Chilean Miners

We have been sent this email referring to a report from CBN on the rescue of the Chilean Miners

CBN News reports that the majority of the miners rescued from a Chilean mine have given evidence of deep spirituality and faith in God. They have all agreed, the report notes, that it was their faith that kept them safe and sound during those 69 days in the depths of the earth.

According to the report each miner emerged from the rescue capsule wearing a shirt that said "Thank you Lord" on the front. On the back of their shirts were the words, "To Him be the glory and honor," from Psalm 95:4, and on one sleeve was the name "Jesus."

Mario Sepúlveda, the second worker who came out of the capsule, said: "God and the devil were fighting over me and God won. I always knew they would get me out. I always had faith in the professionals here in Chile and in the Great Creator."

The fourth miner to surface, Carlos Mamani, knelt down as soon as he came out of the capsule and pointed to Heaven, giving thanks to God, as did Omar Reygadas, who also held a Bible in his hands and wore a helmet with the phrase "God Lives" written on it.

Another report notes that while still trapped in the mine, 19-year-old Jimmy Sanchez had written a letter that was sent up to the surface saying, "There are actually 34 of us, because God has never left us down here."

Perhaps these questions that may be of use in a school context

A) Why were parts of the English Media apparently less keen to publicise the religious nature of the story?

Related to this –

B) Are we fully aware of the current fast growth of Christianity round the world? If not, why not? (May I commend “God is back – How the global rise of faith is changing the world” by John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolwidge)

And – as no doubt many of us will have already discussed –

C) How do stories like this echo the Christian story?

3) A Farewell address Dr Colin Diggory, retiring Headmaster of Alleyn’s School and previously Headmaster of Latymer School, gave this address at the Commemoration Services for the three Dulwich Foundation Schools (Dulwich College, Alleyn’s School, James Allen Girls’ School) on 2nd July 2010

The readings were Job 28: 9-28 and 1 Corinthians 2: 1-10

My faith, though central and very real to me, includes some holes and insecurities - what Leslie Weatherhead described, in his book the ‘Christian Agnostic’, as drawers full of doubt, best left closed for a later time until we can understand. Or as St. Paul put it far better to the Corinthians ‘For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face’ – ‘What I know now is only partial, then it will be complete’. So I reckon that if our faith is held back by a lack of understanding, or doubt, being dragged along like a heavy suitcase, then I reckon we are in good company and must keep going!

I grew up in the 50s and 60s, a child inspired by the space race and putting men on the moon. I recall the Russians first in space and returning to report that they had not seen God anywhere. Inspired by the age of science, I went to read mathematics at Durham with no time for anything illogical or irrational, such as religion. I was a proud, committed atheist even more certain than Richard Dawkins that religion in each age is at best an illusion, the opium of the masses and at worst a deliberate delusion to control the ill educated and superstitious public.

I was incredibly fortunate to be taught by one of the world’s leading theoretical particle physicists, a world expert on quantum theory, small particles and indeed the universe. Imagine my sheer horror, and how my foundations were shattered, when I heard that this Professor not only believed in God but also proclaimed that we, His creatures, could actually know Him? ‘Was he overworked, had he gone mad or unstable’, I thought. This was surely as absurd as an inert clay pot having a relationship with the living potter even if one accepts that there is a potter!

It took me years to unpack my prejudices and assumptions and realise that reason and intelligence are just a very small part of our possible total understanding of life and the universe – wisdom is far more valuable. Pascal, a brilliant mathematician and expert in logic and reason, argued that ‘Reason alone cannot provide our answer to life’.

He warned us that: 'Our soul is cast into the body where it finds number, time, dimensions; it reasons about these things and so then calls them natural or necessary and can believe nothing else'. Therefore we limit ourselves if we allow only evidence and reason to define our life.

My grandson is 8 months old and a sheer joy. I communicate with him in grunts and giggles and silly faces and noises and we understand each other - at least enough for him to get me to run after him and do whatever he wants. But as much as I would love to explain to him the powers of advanced calculus or the sheer delight in understanding number theory, I fear he is not ready yet - he sees through a glass darkly - but one day, I know, he'll get the full picture.

Similarly if there is another dimension, a spiritual dimension, then maybe we as mortals just can't fully get it yet, but surely a wise person would leave open the possibility. For just because something is incomprehensible it does not cease to exist. In fact we should not expect to understand it all; even logic concludes that faith must be necessary at some point. The mathematician Gödel proved in 1931 with his Incompleteness Theorem that within any system of logic or reasoning there will always be statements that can neither be proved nor disproved - so we should not expect reason to lead entirely to God who by definition is outside our closed system of logic and limited reasoning, just as the potter is well outside the pot he creates. I am not saying we must abandon or cannot use reason. When my grandson flings himself at me from the edge of the table it is a leap of faith. He can't prove I'll catch him but it is a reasoned leap into the unknown. He doesn't leap if I'm not there or for a stranger, but he reasons it's a safe bet if it's me or say his Dad. But he will only know for real if he actually jumps, he can't prove I'll catch him.

Our reason then brings us to a position where it is perfectly reasonable, rational even, to then make an act of faith. As Pascal said 'We must rely on faith when the mind has perceived where truth lies. Reason therefore can only lead us to a position of faith because much of life is beyond reason'. This is why I believe that St Paul did not try to proclaim the mystery of God in lofty words and why Job argued that mortals do not know where real understanding is, it cannot be found entirely in this world.

I realised towards the end of my university days after studying mathematics day and night for three years that the art of thinking is the most precious gift that teachers can pass on. Pascal wrote 'Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. If the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler because he knows that he is dying. Thus, our dignity consists in thought. Let us then strive to think well'.

But thinking, in itself, did not bring me into a personal faith in Christ and a real relationship with God, which has directed and sustained me for 36 years and was seriously tested when I truly thought I was dying seven years ago in intensive care.

But by thinking well, and for which I'll be eternally grateful to my university lecturers, I came to a position of being open minded enough to accept there might, just might, be something in all this. The realisation that the crucifixion, an event in history, was actually a revelation that we are part of a living drama with God and as CS Lewis said, the incarnation and the cross & resurrection, shows what happens when the playwright walked onto the stage.

Malcolm Muggeridge was keen to describe life as a drama, not merely inconsequential reactions to actions that happen to us, and a drama in which 'without a god, men have to be gods themselves' and we see that throughout history to our cost.

I too believe that life is a drama and a journey, a journey full of Acts and Scenes of discovery about oneself - not just an endless path of acquiring knowledge, or skills or possessions and far more important than acquiring power, position or status in the eyes of man. □

However, it is far from easy or plain sailing after the leap of faith. Michelangelo said that he saw the angel in the block of marble and carved until he set it free and that is how I see a journey with Christ who wishes us to be free. It is a long and sometimes hard journey.

I close by returning to our texts. Job asks 'where shall wisdom be found?' and answers that real wisdom is to respect or acknowledge the Lord; St Paul reminds us that this age and its wisdom is doomed to perish but the Holy Spirit will reveal all to us.

Father Peter Abelard the 12th Century French philosopher, theologian and logician is supremely qualified and experienced to summarise all this, 'The beginning of wisdom is found in doubting; by doubting we come to the [real] question and by seeking we may come upon the truth'.

I see wisdom as bringing together of, or interconnecting, intellect and reason on the one hand and valid but non-provable experience on the other; accepting and seeing honest doubt as a signpost not a precipice, a signpost to other dimensions on the other side of the dark glass.

In the Foundation Schools of 'God's Gift' our pupils are taught to think well, but in thinking well they must learn to expect and respect honest doubt. And in closing our drawers full of doubts, we have revealed to us, as St Paul says 'Through the Holy Spirit', towers of truth to inspire, guide and protect us.

'For now we see through a glass darkly, but one day we will see face to face'
Amen

4) Advent/Christmas

We are hoping that more ideas will be generated over the next few weeks – do send in some that have been useful for you or you are thinking of trying this time round

Here is a reminder of some that caught our eye last year:

- 1) Try an Advent Carol service
- 2) Tell the story from different viewpoints (eg, the Innkeeper/ a Sheep)
- 3) Acknowledge that Christmas is a difficult time for some students
- 4) Promise a Chaplaincy prize for the best crib scene in a classroom
- 5) Remember the power of the story itself – don't neglect it through trying to be too clever!
- 6) Use a proper Advent calendar in your office or classroom
- 7) Use different versions of the Bible (John 1 in the Message translation is very powerful)
- 8) Hexham Press based at Hexham Abbey in Northumberland, produce a monthly activity sheet called Take This for children aged 7-11 years. Highly recommended. Each child in the Junior School receives a copy as a gift from the chaplain.
- 9) The idea of Posada (see church Army website) Adapted from it's Mexican origins, we provided a kit containing simple figures of Mary, Joseph and the Donkey, along with a candle and a simple script and prayer sheet. The figures 'travel' from class to class in the run up to

Christmas, looking for somewhere to stay. When the figures are handed on there is a simple retelling of the story, a question and response script asking for the recipients to make room for the figures in their class and a prayer about making room in our hearts for Christ this Christmas time.