

WHERE DOES THE HEART GO TO SCHOOL?

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What is the most important quality for a person to have? According to Paul the answer is simple. "I may speak in tongues of men or of angels, but if I am without love I am sounding gong or a clanging symbol. I may have the gift of prophesy and know every hidden truth, I may have faith strong enough to move mountains, but if I have no love I am nothing".

Deep down most of us know that is true. When I think of my children I shall be delighted if they both go to University." But what matters most is that they become the kind of people who are capable of kindness and compassion, and empathy. That is what really matters about anyone. If I think of the best moments in my life most of them are to do with love given and received.

Rightly these days we worry about the quality of our education. But most people view education as a means to know more, to think better, or to get better jobs, not as a way of becoming better people. My question is 'where does the heart go to school?' The most basic human problem is not the millions of people who do not think very well. But the millions of people who do not love very well. My question this morning is how do we create a moral community where we learn how to love?

The first part of the answer is simple. You begin with the child. My sister teaches in a reception class in a deprived area of Norwich. By the time they arrive at the age of 4 or 5 many of the children have seen violence. They know about sex. Already their lives are disturbed. Last week one told my sister. "Mummy just left us. I love mummy but mummy doesn't love me". Another child has just been put into care after her father died of heroin abuse. One of the children didn't know what to write for her surname because so many different men had been living with her mother. Is it any wonder if many of these children are seriously disturbed? Sometimes my sister tells me that when they don't know what to do they sit and scream or make funny noises. Recently a child spat in my sister's face- it turned out she was being sexually abused.

These are extreme cases of course. But I think they help make the point. If you want loving secure people – it begins in the earliest years of love. We've heard a lot recently about "Evil children", "Hoodies," ASBOs. There clearly is increasing anti-social behaviour among young people. But if you're asking why we've getting so many disturbed young people then I say blame the adults before you blame the children. So is this is me coming out in favour of David Cameron's "love a hoodie policy?" Yes it is. Or at least it's me saying that if you want secure loving young people you must give them security and love.

Where does the heart go to school? The first part of the answer is obvious. The family is where it begins. The home is the most basic and most important unit in society. Self-awareness begins at home. Moral values begin at home. Concern for others, our religious lives. All begin in our homes. So those of us who in families let us begin there – with our families and the time and the commitment we give to them.

But the ability to love does not simply come from our families. There's apparently an African saying "It takes a village to raise a child". There's a fundamental truth in that. What we become as a person is not just a matter of what goes on in own family but of the community of which we are a part.

If it takes a village to raise a child there needs to be a school in that village. Going round Overton Grange this last week I noticed there were morally improving posters on the walls with slogans. "A mistake isn't a failure until you fail to admit it". They seemed to come from America and possibly from the pages of the Readers Digest! But at least they were recognising the school is a moral community. Some of you are teachers – you know far more about this than I do. But I asked my sister out of her experience what she thought a school could do for children. Her answer is that the school can try to provide a stable environment - giving the children the kind of stability they don't have at home. They can try to set boundaries showing the children what is and what is not acceptable behaviour. Perhaps they can even try and give the children some sense of being valued. If it takes a village to raise a child then the school is at the heart of that village.

What about the political community? Government, Parliament. How does that relate to the moral purpose of our lives? At this point some degree of caution is necessary. In a week in which one of the key members of the Prime Minister's inner circle has yet again been arrested by the police it might be wise not to invest too many hopes in government as a source of morals. Politicians are no more virtuous than the population in general – anyone who expects them to set the moral tone for society is in for something of a disappointment. All attempts to enforce morals by governments have been disasters – think the Taliban, think prohibition in the US, think Cromwell's Major Generals.

And yet there is more to say. For better or for worse decisions that governments make can affect the kind of country we are. And therefore there is always a moral element in political decision-making. Let me give you two examples. Firstly racism. Over the years we have had legislation outlawing racial discrimination in this country. We have not got rid of racism. But at least you don't anymore see bed and breakfast accommodation with the words "no blacks" as you did when I was a child. In our community racial discrimination and racial hatred are an offence – intolerable in our society. As Martin Luther King once said "It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important". Governments can and must set some moral parameters for society.

In which context why is the government so keen to have as many large casinos opened as it can possibly get away with? The British Medical Association reported the other week that chronic gambling is already a 'Cinderella' among addictions that now needs to be treated as seriously as drug abuse and alcoholism. What will be the effect of increasing people's exposure to gambling? Australia pioneered the deregulation of gambling in the Nineties. Among the population as a whole, Australians spend more money on fruit machines than they do on food. The 330,000 'problem gamblers' are invariably poor or desperate and waste £4,800 a year on average. As if you ask why Australia does not clean its act up – the simple fact is that 10 per cent of tax revenues now come from gambling. If we go down that road does it help us to be a moral community?

And then lastly if it takes a village to raise to child there needs to be a Church in that village. Firstly obviously the Church is itself a moral community. Look here you are this morning

listening to a talk on how do we create a moral community – if you didn't do that in Church where else would you do it? And now I think we have to come to something more basic still.

Of course it is true that there are people who never go near a church who have moral values. Morality is not confined to believers in God. But if the fundamental secret of loving is being secure and loved yourself faith in God is one of the most powerful positive sources of those qualities there is. Supposing we come to feel there is no divine meaning to life or to ourselves. That we are just here today gone tomorrow. Let that belief filter into the very heart of you and what does it do to you?

Is there anyone old enough to remember Marilyn Munroe? That tragic, beautiful star. For a time she was married to the playwright Arthur Miller. In his autobiography, *Timebends*. Miller tells about his marriage to Marilyn Monroe, her depression and despair, her isolation and paranoia and growing dependence on barbiturates. Miller feared for her life. He remembers one evening, after her doctor medicated her and she was finally peacefully sleeping, he found himself thinking, "What if she were to wake and I were able to say: 'God loves you, darling,' and she were able to believe it! How I wish I still had my religion and she still had hers".

This morning hear the gospel as simply as I can put. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son". Each of us is of value. Each of us is loved. What is more we do not have to face life alone. There is power available to help us live. Or as the tee shirt I once saw put it "God made me and God doesn't make junk". "If only she could hear and believe, 'God loves you, darling.'" The gospel makes us strong inside – loved and secure we ourselves can love.

Where does the heart go to school? Where except to the Church of God? Years ago before modern technology a little church on the coast was damaged by a gale. The congregation found themselves unable to rebuild. Then one day a representative of the Admiralty came to ask the vicar if they intended to reconstruct the Church. He explained they could not do it. "Well" said the man from the Admiralty "if you will not rebuild the Church, we will. That spire is on all our charts and maps. It is the landmark by which the ships set their course". A true parable that! If it takes a village to raise a child there needs to be a Church in the village.

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