

## **'The Teacher: character, capacity and competence – exploring the characteristics of great Teachers and how they can be sustained and developed'**

*A lecture given by The Rt. Revd. Dr. Christopher Cockswoth, Bishop of Coventry, on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2016 at the Centre for Professional Education, University of Warwick.*

### **Introduction**

It is a great pleasure and a significant honour which I do not take lightly to speak at this prestigious University on which my Diocese, which covers most of Warwickshire as well as the city of Coventry, depends, economically as well as educationally. You don't need to scratch most bishops very hard to discover that we suffer, regularly, from 'imposter syndrome'. We find ourselves, curiously in inverse proportion to the secularisation of society, invited into all sorts of arenas in which we are by no means fully qualified to speak, and we enter them, as it were, from the left field as quirky amateurs, rather than as seasoned professionals. We find different ways to steel ourselves for the task in hand. Mine today, I confess, was to remind myself that though the University of Warwick is indeed a great University, it remains a young one and its dynamic story is still fairly new. The Diocese of Coventry – on the other hand – has been around for many years. The first named Bishop of Coventry dates from 1121, with one of my reverend predecessors playing a hand in the Magna Carta in 1215, and both of them looking back to a lineage before them bearing other designations – Lichfield and Mercia – but serving the same patch of land. For all of that time we have been involved in education in one form or another because we follow the Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, by whose teaching we are told, people were astounded (Matthew 7:28; 22:33, Mark 1:22 and Luke 4:32).

So thank you for the kindness of your invitation. Incidentally, when I was suffering a particularly strong dose of imposter syndrome the last week, my wife said to me, 'Yes, but God is

kind'. It was a very lovely thing to say except it made me think – 'that lecture which I'm about to write for Warwick is all wrong. It should be about kindness because that is one of the great virtues of great teachers: kindness'. Well I resisted the urge to change tack at the last minute but you should know that the kindness of God, and the kindness of the people whose teaching and teacherliness have influenced me most, were in the back of my mind as my fingertips hit the keyboard.

### **A vision for education**

'Without a vision, the people perish' (Proverbs 29:18), so says the ancient Hebrew proverb. It's certainly true for a modern teacher: without a vision for education we lose our reason for being educationalists. In my all too meagre reading for today's lecture, I found myself drawn to the UNESCO Report by its International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century. Though, in Brexit Britain, I should warn you that the Commission's Chairman is Jacques Delors (!) – but, of course, the European Project was first and foremost an educational project, educating Europe for peace, and the world for peace through Europe's own learning from its past with its lessons for the future, and that its economic project was only a means to that end.

Let me give you a taster with a few quotations from the Commission's report.

The Commission does not see education as a miracle cure or a magic formula opening the door to a world in which all ideals will be attained, but as one of the principle means available to foster a deeper and more harmonious form of human development and thereby to reduce poverty, exclusion, ignorance, oppression and war.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Delors et al., *Learning: The Treasure Within - Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 1996) 11, available via

The Commission goes on describe education as ‘an expression of affection for children and young people’ (there it is, *kindness*) and as a ‘noble task’. I like that, *a noble task*: I have said to the headteachers of the 76 church schools in the Diocese of Coventry, that theirs is a ‘sacred ministry’; actually it applies to all teachers, their service has a quality of the sacred about it. ‘A noble task’, the Commission says, ‘to encourage each and every one, acting in accordance with their traditions and convictions and paying full respect to pluralism, to lift their minds and spirits to the plane of the universal and, in some measure, to transcend themselves. It is no exaggeration on the Commission’s part to say that the survival of humanity depends thereon’.<sup>2</sup>

To be lifted up so that one may transcend oneself. That’s quite a purpose for education, an ‘aim’, so the Commission says, that ‘transcends all others’.<sup>3</sup> It is, to quote again, ‘a continuous process of forming whole human beings – their knowledge and aptitudes, as well as the critical faculty and the ability to act. It should enable people to develop awareness of themselves and their environment and encourage them to play their social role at work and in the community’.<sup>4</sup>

‘Forming the whole person’ in community for community. I like that. I’ve tried to say something similar to our headteachers when I’ve spoken and written about their calling (a word I use very intentionally, a calling to ‘a noble task’) that is to serve (another word I use advisedly, for that is the meaning of the Christian word of ministry), to serve *the whole well-being of the whole child*, the whole person, and that means the whole person in the whole environment in which that person large or small lives and moves

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<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/rethinking-education/resources/>

<sup>2</sup> Delors et al., *Learning*, 16

<sup>3</sup> Delors et al., *Learning*, 17

<sup>4</sup> Delors et al., *Learning*, 19

and has being, a community which extends to the whole community of creation.<sup>5</sup>

The UNESCO Commission goes on to propose and describe its 'four pillars of education'. They are worth listing:

- Learning to know.
- Learning to do.
- Learning to live together, with others.
- Learning to be.<sup>6</sup>

Now that rather neatly maps on to the aims of education as presented in the Church of England's newly articulated – or re-articulated – vision for education.

- Educating for wisdom, knowledge and skills;
- Educating for hope and aspiration;
- Educating for community and life together;
- Educating for respect and dignity.<sup>7</sup>

The Church of England vision – to which my own Diocesan Education Team contributed significantly – envisions the purpose of education as education for *life in its fullness*. That's certainly how I've come to see education – education for life, not just life-long learning (and learning really is life-long as the longer your life goes on you realise more and more) but learning for *life*, for being truly alive, and truly alive with others in the living organism of the world. And if I may throw in a theological gem from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century's Irenaeus of Lyon, that the glory of God (the joy and purpose of God) is a human being fully alive. It's what God – in kindness – is in the business of creating, forming a world: to give it life and to see people fully alive, not just existing but truly,

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Cocksworth and Linda Wainscot, *Head Teachers as Community Pastors – eD25* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2015) 13

<sup>6</sup> Delors et al., *Learning*, 20-21

<sup>7</sup> *Church of England Vision for Education: Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good - GS 2039* (London: The Church of England Education Office, 2016) 9, available via <https://www.churchofengland.org/education/publications/asp>

joyfully, expectantly, creatively, productively, morally, spiritually living, a form of living full of fecundity. 'I have come that you might have life', said Jesus the rabbi, the teacher, 'life in all its fullness' (John 10:10).

Lifting humanity into fullness of life, into the full stature of human living. Now that's a vision of education and one that demands excellence in the training, educating and forming of teachers.

### **From vision to wastage**

I suspect the educationalist is rather like the theologian and pastor. We speak in heady terms of vision and we believe in that as a reality which has gotten hold of us and for which we yearn, and we know that the proverb is right, 'without a vision the people perish'. Yet we hold to this reality amidst another reality – the reality of real life where there is such (and I'm going to use a very crude word, far removed from vision), 'wastage'.

Yes, the Commission is right, education is a noble task. Yes, I remain convinced that teaching is a sacred ministry, a service to humanity that touches the holy, the sphere of transcendence where human beings and whole societies are lifted up, transformed, but the profession (again I use the word very intentionally – I really worry about anything that reduces the dignity of the teacher) the profession suffers from wastage.

Here my observations are very personal and anecdotal but I share them with you anyway. Mine is an interesting stage of life. Some of my children are becoming established in their careers, and so are their spouses and friends. They are in their twenties and early thirties. Quite a number of them are teachers, and young teachers trained through a variety of methods from PGCE to Schools Direct. When I saw this lecture looming in the diary I sent out a plea to them to send me some thoughts. This is part of how one of them – a Cambridge PhD – replied (someone to whom, I won't use

her name, I said after her second year of teaching, 'I think you've found your vocation'. To which she replied, 'Yes, I think I have').

One thing that I think could have helped in preparing us for teaching today is a little more emphasis on mental health . . . of teachers! There was a lot about the mental health of the pupils but not about how to guard your own mental health as a teacher. It is such a busy and demanding job, people go into teaching to make a difference but you soon find that things are so busy you feel you are doing so much but nothing very well! I would have liked to hear from some more experienced teachers – perhaps even retired teachers – about how they balanced work and life and how they guarded their own time whilst still feeling they were doing a decent job for the kids. I already know of at least three teachers who are talking about leaving the profession just a few years in because they are struggling to handle the demands of the job.

'I already know of at least three teachers who are talking about leaving the profession just a few years in because they are struggling to handle the demands of the job'. That's worrying. I think of another one of our family. After a first in English at Newcastle, followed by an MLitt there and a dilemma over whether to become a full-time academic, time in South America learning Spanish, time in Jordan learning Arabic and dipping into teaching, albeit unqualified, he trained to teach. Ideals took him to a 'good with outstanding features' school in the east of London with a majority pupil premium intake (he wanted to teach disadvantaged children in a setting that was committed to advantaging them). They were two tough years when, he would admit, he often thought of walking out on the job. But his commitment to the young people, who are very used to people walking out on them, kept him there. He's taking a break from the profession now. The East London experience cannot be blamed entirely – he's in Germany learning German because he's in love

with a German woman who's just finished her training to be a teacher – but it would be fair to say that he has wondered whether teaching is a sustainable career. You'll be glad to know that he's looking for teaching jobs now – in Germany! – but whether he'll return to teaching in the UK is an open question.

Now, the experience of my family and their friends may not be representative but it's an interesting case study. Two words have come to my mind on how sustainability can be built into the profession: reasonableness and resilience.

On reasonableness, I am thinking of forces external to teachers themselves: the structures and systems of the educational system in which they serve and which should serve them for the sake of a sustainable educational system. Schools, academies, Boards of Governors, Local Authorities, Dioceses, Academy Sponsors, Chains and Members, Regional School Commissioners, the DfE, Ministers of State, the Secretary of State have a responsibility to be reasonable to the profession on which they rely. Are they making *reasonable* demands on teachers, demands appropriate to the stage and development of the teacher, demands that, yes, stretch the teacher but do not break the teacher, demands that require the teacher to teach and administrate, to lead and to go on learning but do so in a way that develops professional pride not, as my family member said, a continual sense of doing nothing well? Of course, because my family are at that early-career stage of life, I'm very conscious of the need, the responsibility, the duty of care to them as persons and professionals, to nurture, to grow, to shape these precious young plants that have so much potential to bring life to others – but it applies to all teachers, whatever their age and their stage of work.

On resilience I am thinking more internally: the factors that relate to the teacher as a person and professional, the characteristics that adhere to the teacher and provide the basis for longevity in the profession. We might call them the structural basis of

teacherliness. Preachers like to work with patterns of three, each ideally beginning with the same letter. So let you offer my three, or probably four – I’m not a very good preacher – *character, capacity, competence* and *community*, though *community* relates to all three, to character, to capacity and to competence. They are not entirely unrelated to the categories that I worked with as a Principal of a Theological College when I was responsible for – and these are the categories – the education, training and formation of priests and pastors, and also youth workers, within a context of common life of some form.<sup>8</sup>

### **Three virtues of teacherliness: competence, capacity and character – in community**

A few words about *competence*: in a way it’s the least interesting but it is the most fundamental. Incompetence in a profession is a sort of theft – obviously so in a lawyer or an accountant but just as truly theft in a teacher. An incompetent teacher denies opportunity for the young person, the student of any age, it steals life-chances away from those to whom the noble task of education is meant to convey them. Competence is dignifying. It raises the person, lifts the apprentice into a professional.

Principals of Theological Colleges eschew training in ‘priestcraft’ as it is disparagingly called. The shaping of the future ministers of the Church is a much bigger business than inculcating basic skills. But it certainly includes it, as I realized to my cost when I became a bishop full of high sounding theology about the significance of the role but not knowing how and when to put on my mitre! Training in the fundamental skills of the teacher is fundamental to developing excellence, and it pertains to initial training, to the early years of the teacher and to each stage of new responsibility.

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<sup>8</sup> ‘The Church of England Foundation For Educational Leadership’, beginning with pilot activities during 2016/17, offers rigorous leadership development programmes and large-scale research into pupil’s spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional and social development within peer support networks and an online collaboration platform. See <https://www.churchofengland.org/education/the-church-of-england-foundation-for-educational-leadership.aspx>



The advice to one of my family members of her headteacher to resist the lure of an early opportunity for departmental leadership in order to better learn the – as he put it – ‘craft of teaching’ was good advice that will build resilience into her career.

Community is relevant to competence, of course. You don’t learn competence from yourself. You learn it from others. I remember from my own teacher training how it all began with observation, and then moved into working with a trained teacher in the classroom till eventually we went solo. Come to think of it, it was like that when I was first in a parish: essentially an apprentice model. It’s an ancient pattern. Jesus did it. He gathered a group of disciples – learners – around him. They observed him. They began to do what he did. He honed their skills. Sent them out again until eventually they took over from where he left off (there’s some theological nuancing I’d like to give there, but you see the point). One bit of historical nuancing, though, which is important – he always sent them out in pairs. They did it together, and learnt from each other. I’m interested in what the Director of our Multi-Academy Trust tells me about how he has developed networks for new teachers so that they can support and learn from each other. That sounds like good practice with sound precedent.

There’s more to say about *competence* but I’d like to move on to the second of my triptych of resilience builders – *capacity*. So let me leave my first builder of resilience – competence – with a confession. As an educator I think I have down-played the impartation of skills. That’s partly because I like the world of ideas (the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ sort of questions more than the ‘how’s’ of doing it) and partly because my own secondary school gave the impression that it was training us for the shop floor and nothing else. I did not just want ‘to do’ something. I wanted ‘to know’ something and ‘to be someone’.

That brings me on to *capacity*. I think it’s the right word but there may be a better one. It’s what I meant by educating people for the

Church's ministry rather than simply training them to be religious functionalities in my former role as a Principal. Crudely it's about the mind, and the patterns of behaviour that flow from a well-formed mind, rather than the hands or the mouth – the organs of doing. I've chosen capacity as a way into this area because it seems to me that resilience requires capacity. Capacity, yes in the sense of the capacities, the ability and skills to get a job done, but capacity also in the sense of the reserves of energy to sustain that work over time. This is a lot about developing stamina and depth, growing the width of our shoulders, strengthening our core muscles, straightening our spines. It has a lot to do with competence and even more to do with my third resilience builder, *character* but it also pertains to the education of the mind and its ensuing patterns of behavior that build in *capacity* to the teacher.

At its root are knowledge, understanding and wisdom. It concerns the subjects that drew us into the love of learning and their transformative, transcending effect on us as human beings, an effect that included for teachers – and perhaps first stirred the vocation in them, first called them into this noble task of education – the desire to share the wonder of that learning and the joy of seeing it work its magic on another human being and to know that we were the bearers of this life-giving gospel, this good news.

I tried to do a lot of that as Principal of a Theological College, and I loved it. But when I go back to theological colleges now I find myself telling these potential priests busting with theological energy to make sure that when they get in the parish they change their socks regularly! The days are long and sometimes gruelling. They will need to – as St Paul said to his student now released into Christian leadership – 'pay close attention to [themselves]' (1 Timothy 4:16) or, as he exhorted the elders of the Ephesian church whom he was about to leave in full charge of the church, they will have to 'keep watch over [themselves]' (Acts 20:28), and that means their bodies as well as their souls. That's another sort of capacity building – developing patterns of professional and

personal life (the reality for pastors is that those two blur, as I suspect they do for teachers; that's the trouble with vocations), patterns of professional and personal life that will enable them to be, as my dad used to say when watching the races, 'eight furlong merchants', rather than elegant thoroughbreds that fall at the first fence.

All that is important, and I wish I'd said more of it as a Principal but don't let the socks smother the books. 'What are you reading at the moment?', asked my bishop when I was a new curate. 'No time for that now', I said, 'Bishop'. 'You fool', he replied with uncharacteristic force, 'unless you read you'll become a second-rate social worker'. Social work is also a noble task but a priest is not a social worker, and neither is a teacher. Unless you continue to enlarge your heart and soul and mind with the energizing capacities of the knowledge, understanding and wisdom that pertain to the calling of a minister – and the calling of a teacher – you will be at best a second rate imitation of something else, at worst you will dry out and renege on the profession you made to transform the lives of human beings, to allow them to transcend themselves.

I realize that I have not said anything about being educated in community for community. I would love to develop that but time does not allow because I want to move on to the third theme of my triptych, *character*. Suffice it to say, that if education is, as the UNESCO commission emphasizes 'learning to live together, learning to live with others', and if Desmond Tutu is right that 'we learn how to think, how to walk, how to speak, how to behave, indeed how to be human from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human', if all that is true, then being educated to be an educator involves doing so in community, a community of learners, a community of disciples, learners. It stands to reason because teachers stand on the shoulders of others in a long tradition of learning. And what we do as educators, educates not only individuals but whole communities, not just

communities of the classroom but the communities of which the students are part.

So what about *character*? This is the big one, it seems to me, and where things become exciting, truly exciting. There's a great deal I'd like to say here but time is moving on so I'm going to build my thoughts around another triptych: that which is traditionally known as the 'three theological virtues'. They can be found bound together in the hymn to love in Paul's letter to the Corinthian Christians in about 57 CE. Paul was a rather brilliant educator in word and deed, though one of his students, Eutychus, famously fell out of an window three stories up, having 'begun to sink into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer', as narrated by Luke (Acts 20:7-12), a doctor by profession and clearly more disciplined in brevity. When Paul went downstairs to sort out the crisis in the classroom, 'he', according to Luke, 'took [Eutychus] in his arms, and said to the onlookers, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him"'. Clearly a bit of safeguarding training was needed but I'm glad to see Paul agreed with me, that education is all about life! It certainly didn't dent his resilience as a teacher. Paul sent them back upstairs and continued till dawn!

### **Three theological virtues of faith, hope and love**

I don't think Eutychus would have slept through these words, though: 'And now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love' (1 Corinthians 13:13). To be fair, although Paul uses them, and does so masterfully, they may not have been his own composition. They may even have formed a pre-Christian hymn that was doing the rounds and began with the immortal words, 'If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clashing cymbal' (verse 1 Corinthians 13:1). Like any good teacher Paul could spot a good resource when he saw it.

'Faith, hope, and love abide'. Excellent Teachers need the virtue of faith: faith in what they are doing as teachers, its nobility and dignity; faith that education is liberating human beings for life and empowering communities for living; faith that the vocation of a teacher is transformative, that it enables peoples and places to transcend themselves. They need faith in the children and students of all ages, their infinite worth and their unbounded potential. They need faith when it's difficult to have faith, when crises of faith come along as they do to all of us – Mother Teresa included as we discovered shortly before she died.

Teaching is not easy. There are forces at work that undermine it, wear it down and sometimes even blow it up. That's what's happening in Aleppo at the moment. Powerful forces of violence and chaos unleashed by adults upon adults as the whole city descends deeper into hell and the children have life stolen from them. But faith prevails in Aleppo. Two weeks ago I met one of the 'White Helmets' from East Aleppo. He was in Coventry for two days to receive a prize before returning to the half of the city being pounded by its country's President. Last week I met a Roman Catholic priest from West Aleppo about to return from London to his side of the city that is suffering daily bombardments from those trying to overthrow the President. On both sides of the city the children's education is being stolen from them by warring adults. But no one has lost faith in education and in teachers. They know their future depends on it.

Excellent teachers need the virtue of hope: not the psychological state of optimism but the deep 'reservoir of hope'<sup>9</sup> that change can happen and that education can effect it. Napoleon said that 'A leader is a dealer in hope'. Teachers are leaders. They lead people into life, into verdant pastures of learning, to dazzling vistas of wonder, to untold possibilities for human living. A teacher is a dealer in hope. Teachers need deep reservoirs of hope in the value

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Flinham, *Sustaining Hope in School Leadership* - eD22 (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2015) 3

of education and the vital role that they play in it. They need to know that the people who have really changed the world are the teachers, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Guru Nanak and countless other sages from the Indian sub-continent (the list could go on), *and their mothers*. Teachers need to have hope in children and young people, their students of all ages and stages – hope that they have the potential to be great and to do great things. And they need ways of replenishing their ‘reservoirs of hope’ when they run dry.

Excellent teachers need love, that greatest – as St Paul says – of gifts, ‘the still more excellent way’ (1 Corinthians 12:31), as he puts it. They need a love of learning for themselves and for their students. They need love of the art and craft of teaching, its ancient pedigree, the esteemed tradition of teachers in which they stand, the nobility of their work, the great dignity of raising others to a fuller dignity of their human stature. They need love for their students; more indeed than the ‘expression of affection’ of which the UNESCO report speaks and certainly much more than the emotions of love. (And please, when I mention love in this context remember that I am in the world of St Paul whose vocabulary of love was more sophisticated than others. He’s using the word *agape* not *eros*.) Agape-love: love that he earlier defines as kind (there we are, perhaps this lecture is all about kindness after all); love that ‘does not insist on its own way’ but persists in seeking the good of the other; love that is interested above everything else in the interests of the other. And teachers need to find ways of restoring their love of teaching, their love for their students and their schools; ways that, as the ordination service of priests and deacons puts it, allow their hearts to be ‘daily enlarged’.<sup>10</sup>

To be built on the virtues of faith, hope and love, the virtues on which I am suggesting the sustainability of the teacher depend, virtues that build resilience into the teacher and lead to the

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<sup>10</sup> Common Worship Ordination Services, *The Liturgy of Ordination* (London: The Archbishop’s Council of the Church of England) available via <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/ordinal.aspx>

excellence of the teacher, that sort of teacher will need to be a teacher in whom others have faith, place their hope and commit themselves to love. Allow me to end if you will by sharing my strong belief that the most excellent teachers will be those who have come to know that God has faith in them, that God has set his hope in them and that God's reservoirs of love for them will never run dry.

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