

Education: Knowledge and Wisdom

Until recently the third Sunday before Lent, just under two weeks ago, was kept by the different denominations as Education Sunday. Although it has now been moved to the second Sunday of September I felt that the topic of education was a timely one for us reflect upon today. Having spent all my working life in educational establishments, though in a support role, I would maintain that education at all levels is more important than ever.

We are told that ours is the information age. And yet there is an increasing tendency for politicians and others to ignore facts where they do not support or where they contradict their own agendas. For them facts should not get in the way of preconceptions, prejudices or ideologies. Experts are increasingly dismissed as superfluous, even a nuisance. Experts do often disagree with one another. They sometimes get things wrong or change their minds. But that is clearly much better, and safer, than obstinate ignorance.

We need to make a distinction, though, between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is neutral and yet is a necessary prerequisite to making informed decisions. Wisdom, on the other hand, is something far deeper. It involves knowing how to use knowledge and apply it in both in general and in particular situations. It involves a deeper quest for truth.

In many ways it is comparatively easy to teach and to learn knowledge. Though understanding that knowledge is the more difficult part. Wisdom, though, is far more difficult to teach – some would say impossible. The traditional way was by example, whether perhaps in a university or a religious community.

For wisdom is more than being clever. It is about discernment, perception, critical analysis. As we heard just now in the letter of James (James 3.13-18) wisdom comes ultimately from God. It is “pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”

The need for men and women full of wisdom is even greater than ever. And our hope is that wisdom will flourish and grow particularly in our children and young people. For they are our future.

For James the key characteristic of wisdom is peace. Wise men and women are peaceable. For they see that peace is the only real way forward. And importantly they are at peace within themselves.

We pray that we too may be granted the gift of wisdom, the gift of discernment, the gift of peace.

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Kingsley Boulton