

Faith in Education?

Perspectives on Religion & Learning (3)

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Thank you, Vaughan, for asking me to do this Lent address. It is the first time I have ever spoken words that I have written from a pulpit, and I have to confess that I do not feel qualified or worthy to do so. If I'm honest I have a bad dose of impostor syndrome.

Wikipedia says that impostor syndrome is a psychological pattern in which an individual doubts their accomplishments and has a persistent internalized fear of being exposed as a "fraud". It goes on to say that despite external evidence of their competence, those experiencing this phenomenon remain convinced that they are frauds, and do not deserve all they have achieved. They attribute their success to luck, or see it as a result of deceiving others into thinking they are more intelligent than they perceive themselves to be.

When I first heard about this syndrome some weeks ago, I realised that it was not only giving this address that made me think I might have impostor syndrome. I regularly feel that the position of headteacher has come to me by luck, not merit, and I am wholly under qualified and unable to fulfil the role. Yes, I have more than the required paper qualifications and experience, but after each successful job interview, especially the one for headteacher, I have always had the scary feeling that someone will find out I can't do the job, and that they have made a terrible mistake.

To help me feel more confident about speaking to you tonight, I am using my tried and tested three-part lesson plan format.

First I will talk about how my early experiences shaped me and led to me becoming a special needs teacher. Second I will talk a little about the school where I have the privilege to be the headteacher, and third I would like to share with you how my faith and experiences relate to that role.

For as long as I can remember, I have liked two things in particular: water, and music. As a child I spent much of my time swimming or sailing. I sailed a little boat called an international cadet, which, for racing purposes, had an age restriction of 17. I was taught to sail from the age of 6 by 10- and 11-year-olds, and in turn started teaching my younger brother and others when I was about 10. There wasn't room for an adult in the boat, and anyway they weren't allowed. Sometimes we found ourselves in tricky situations, but there was always a rescue boat nearby.

As a teenager, I had the best summer job ever, teaching sailing. I loved it, and found that I particularly enjoyed teaching the children and adults who found the skills hard to pick up. I had struggled to learn to read and write, and still have very personalised ways of spelling, so maybe that drew me to those who needed extra time and support to learn a new skill. Or

maybe it's just because I have always been decidedly stubborn and unwilling to give up and have always enjoyed and sought out a challenge in more or less everything I have done.

At about the same age as I started sailing, I also began to sing in the choir where my grandfather played the organ. At first I sat next to him on the organ bench, but after a while I fitted into the smallest cassock and surplice and was allowed to join the front row of the choir. To be honest, I remember being quite naughty, always dropping my collection money, drawing and playing dot to dot when I should have been listening, and sometimes even talking during rehearsals. (I'm sure none of those things go on in our choir!) But nonetheless it instilled in me a love of music that became part of who I am.

So the sailing and the choir set me on an early course to do a music degree, then a teaching qualification in Special Educational Needs. Underneath these obvious connections of skills and interests in the journey from my younger self to 'Mandy the headteacher' (as one of my pupils always addresses me) run other threads that I can trace back to these early experiences.

Sailing on the River Thames in the 1960s was not a very safe thing to do. There was the threat of falling into the polluted water or being dragged under one of the large river boats or ferries. We, as children, were not really fully aware of the risks, but the adults who watched over us from the rescue boats were aware. I never felt I would be in real danger. If things went wrong, there was always someone there to help and support me.

Singing in Grandpa's choir brought me to church week by week, where I heard the stories from the Bible and sang wonderful music based on those stories, just like the inspiring anthem we have heard tonight, based partly on the end of our reading, about the angels ascending and descending to and from heaven. For me, the biggest direct influence on my understanding and knowledge of the Bible has come through singing or leading church music. It so often helps me to understand the words more deeply and connects with my emotions in ways words alone rarely do. But again, it is not just that overt connection between singing in a church choir and my developing faith that I now reflect upon.

I must have been a real pain at times for my Grandpa, yet I remember him always being kind and patient with me. He would find a way to help all of us lively youngsters want to sing well and to concentrate, without becoming angry. He would help us to see that we had a responsibility to the congregation and to God to lead the service. He would quietly and gently put the worship of Christ at the centre of what we were doing. When I moved to Chichester as an 11-year-old, I was fortunate enough to have a choir leader called Sue Howell-Evans who did the same. She was not only a superb musician, but had a deep faith that influenced me profoundly. She didn't shout it from the rooftops, but took those opportunities to share her thoughts at times when she judged that they would be received well. She gave me time, and she listened to me. I remember saying, after singing a hymn based on a Bach Chorale, that I didn't think about the words, because the music was the important bit (I think I was trying to be clever). Sue just said gently, "That's a shame" ... No more... No critical edge to her voice... No disapproving look... It made me think, and transformed how I thought of the words set to hymns and anthems from then onwards.

Later, when I have led church choirs and tutored on Royal School of Church Music courses, choosing the music to go with readings, and then helping choristers understand the meaning of what they were singing, was something for which I felt a strong responsibility.

I will come back to this formative experience in a moment, but let's fast forward many years to the second part of my address, and introduce the school where I am headteacher. In 2011, I was appointed to be the headteacher of Bettridge in Cheltenham. The reason I applied for a job over an hour's commute away from home was that I reckoned that the interview would be a good experience. I didn't actually think I would get the job. I was appointed, much to my surprise, and was persuaded to take up the position by the Chair of Governors, who seemed to believe in me and my vision for the school and convinced me that the other governors and staff did as well. It was that belief in me that overcame my own feeling of self-doubt and real worry, not only about the commute, but also about being found out as an impostor, and someone who was not up to the task of leadership.

So what is Bettridge School like? We have in total 120 staff responsible for 145 children and young people who range in age from 2 to 19. All of them have severe or profound learning difficulties. This means that they will be working at levels very significantly below their age-related expectations. Some are still working at the same level as a neurotypical 6-month-old baby, even though they may be 18 years old. Even our most able learners are not working much above the age-related expectations for Year 1 (6-year-olds).

About one third of the pupils have Autism, which affects them in a variety of ways. Those who are affected most have limited or no spoken language, struggle to understand social interaction, have very high levels of anxiety, and may have additional mental health conditions such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder or psychosis. Not surprisingly, these children and young people often develop behaviours that challenge them and others, and can result in injuries.

Another third of the school have physical disabilities as well as a learning disability. Many are wheelchair dependent or have limited mobility. About 20 pupils need feeding via tubes directly into their stomachs. All of these tasks are carried out by our teachers and teaching assistants.

We also have a number of children and young people with medical conditions such as epilepsy, diabetes, or breathing difficulties requiring oxygen, suction or a tracheotomy. Again, it is the teachers and teaching assistants who manage and support these needs. We do have training from health professionals. But the austerity cuts over the last few years have meant that we have had to fight for this training. We have a few children with degenerative and life-limiting conditions. One of these children has just celebrated her fifth birthday: a milestone she was not expected to reach. Ensuring the family, staff and fellow pupils are prepared for what is to come, and are supported when it does, is another crucial part of the work of the school.

As well as having their health, wellbeing, personal care and behaviour needs met, these wonderful children and young people have an absolute right, like all other children, to receive

the best education we can offer. Being able to communicate their needs and wishes is life transforming for them. Being able to express themselves through words, music, art and movement is as important to the pupils at Bettridge as it is to the pupils we heard about last week from King's High, or to our choristers here today. We are aspirational for every child, striving for each of them to be the best that they can be and to achieve as much independence and fulfilment in their adult lives as possible. We are fortunate to have the most amazing, hard-working and dedicated staff that share those goals and put our children and young people at the centre of all they do.

So finally, how do my formative experiences and my faith relate to being the Head of Bettridge?

From the outside, and sometimes from the inside, working in a special school, particularly as the headteacher, could look like an impossible job. It can certainly be stressful and there are times when I doubt that I am up to the task. That impostor syndrome raises its unsettling head, and I fear I can't keep all the plates spinning. It is then, as long as I remember to pause and listen, that the still small voice finds its way into my head.

For several years I worked at one of our local special schools here in Warwick, Round Oak, with a long-term member of our congregation and an inspirational headteacher, Puffin Pocock. Puffin believed in her pupils, and in her staff. I don't think it's any coincidence that four of those working with her in the few years before she retired are now serving headteachers in special schools. Puffin had a mantra: "It will be fine". I always took this to be a shortened version of "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." This is perhaps the best-known phrase from the 15th Century Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich, whose positive attitude to life was quite remarkable, especially as she must have witnessed the effects of the Black Death.

On my own, I could not do the job I do. I could never have fulfilled the responsibilities of the roles I have held over the years. Yet through the guidance of those who have influenced my growing faith, and through my understanding of scripture, I know that I will never be tested more than I can bear. I know that I have a safety boat constantly running alongside me, (to use that image from my sailing days) and that I just need to stop struggling to stay afloat and to ask, and I will receive help.

But what about those who don't know Christ, and don't have the experience of knowing that all shall be well? Is it OK to share my faith, especially as I am in a position of authority? Could this be seen as an abuse of power? Bettridge is not a faith school, so how should I share my faith with the children and young people who are so vulnerable and impressionable? Could being overtly Christian and "spreading the Gospel" be regarded as indoctrination and wrong? Over the last two weeks, Bishop Christopher and Richard Nicholson shared some of their thoughts about this during their addresses and in the question and answer session afterwards. I certainly don't think I have the answers to these questions, but I am happy share how I respond to them.

I do think that all leaders who have a faith need to tread carefully whilst remaining true to their own beliefs. I think I would define my approach as having a ministry of Christian

Presence. At Bettridge we have a number staff members who are Christian, and there is a prayer network amongst us. We do occasionally pray together, but have struggled to make this a regular occurrence. We make sure that prayer meetings are in the school diary, and that anyone is welcome to come. I encourage our local clergy to be part of our school community, taking assemblies, being involved in school events, and giving them an open invitation to the school. Our assemblies, which I usually lead, are “of a broadly Christian character” and include a prayer and a song, which is often Christian. We do ensure that other faiths are taught in lessons and through assemblies. I am careful to use phrases such as “some Christians believe that” or “some Muslims believe that” when explaining faith-related subjects. I am also open to saying, “I believe that”. When staff or families are bereaved or suffering through illness or hardship, I will tell them, through a conversation, a card or a note, that my thoughts and prayers are with them.

One of the biggest differences I have found between being a teacher or middle leader in a school, and becoming the headteacher, is that people – staff, parents and pupils – tell you the things that are deeply affecting their lives because of the position you are in, rather than the personal relationship you have. How you react to them has a big impact on the whole ethos of the school. Giving them time, showing kindness, compassion and interest, and respecting what is important to them above what is uppermost in my mind is what I aspire to do, but I know that I often fall short of those aspirations when I am under pressure.

Well, I would like to bring us back to the reading we heard tonight – John’s version of the calling of the disciples. I am particularly drawn to the calling of Nathaniel. When Philip tells Nathaniel about Jesus, Nathaniel speaks his mind honestly saying, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Yet this doesn’t put Jesus off calling Nathaniel to be one of the chosen 12. Jesus replies, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

Even when he has just had an insult thrown in his face, Jesus sees the good in Nathaniel, and in turn, Nathaniel recognises Jesus for who he is: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God.”

In Luke’s Gospel, the account of the calling of the disciples records Simon saying, “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man,” to which Jesus replies, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” Reading these passages made me think that the first disciples may have felt they were imposters. They certainly voiced their doubts and fears about being called by Jesus. What must Nathaniel have thought when he was told that he would see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man?

I have not experienced this sort of dramatic calling, but I have always felt strongly drawn to the Christian faith. Richard, last week, talked about rebelling against his Anglican upbringing by becoming a Catholic for a while. My own rebellion as a teenager was to refuse to sail with my family on days when the races coincided with singing in the church choir. I don’t think this was on moral grounds, but because I preferred singing to sailing by that stage. If God calls each one of us to be a disciple in his name, he must know our strengths and our weaknesses, and want us to be who we are.

If God accepts me to be who I am, with all my faults and foibles, I don't need to worry about imposter syndrome or to be anyone different in order to share his word. I just need to remember what messages Jesus taught us:

The message of love and forgiveness.

The call to pray through the words of the Lord's prayer.

The Beatitudes.

The words are there for us to read, sing, listen to and pray about if we choose to do so. Do I always remember to do this? No, of course not, and I know that there are many times I fall far short of upholding Christian values. Then it's time to remember Jesus' teaching about forgiveness.

There have been many people over the years who have shaped my faith and my life. My Grandpa truly walked the walk of his faith. Sue had the gift of knowing when to talk about her faith, and how to choose just the right words. Puffin helped me believe in myself, and to know that all would be well. There are, of course many others, and I am sure that each of you will have had similar encounters and know people who have shaped, and are still shaping, your lives. Each of us, whatever age we are, whatever job we do, shapes the lives of others, even if we are not always aware we are doing so.

With God's grace, and the help of my friends from many eras of my life, I continue to try to fight off that annoying impostor syndrome and believe that I can walk the walk of Christ, and choose the right words and the right moments so that people will see His love and want to know more.

Above all, I do believe that Jesus calls each of us to be his disciple through whatever we choose to do, and that, if we ask, he will be there, and all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well!