

THE PREACHING CONTINUES - CHALLENGES FOR SCHOOLS TODAY WHAT DO WE VALUE?

Challenges for today – there are so many, and many people here are better equipped than me to speak about them.

Then I thought about the second part – what do we value? I was reminded of the days when on retreats (in the 80's) for the seniors we did things around values clarification and we ran a values auction. I knew I was past it in the generational thing when I found myself getting annoyed that the value of love would be considered priceless – huge payout, but commitment would go for \$20.

So I thought I had better do a bit of values clarification for myself. I walked out on to the verandah outside my office and looked at the scene around me. When I retire as principal next year I will have been the Principal for 21 years.

So I took a walk out on the verandah outside my office to get a fresh look, away from the computer screen.

What do I value? I noticed first some of the physical things; what I could see, but on each occasion that was an external reminder of the people who lay behind, and in almost every case that was about a quality of relationship.

Firstly, the landscape, taking in the trees, lawns and buildings.

I value the blind faith and creativity of those who have gone before and had the foresight to develop such spaces and who saw the importance of creating something of beauty where education takes place; women who had a sense that beauty and artistry can be a way of preaching;

I value the care and dedication of those who take pride in maintaining them to this day. I looked at the special lawned area we call Dom's Plot and recalled the celebrations that have gone on around it; the exuberance of the young people who have danced and sung upon it, sometimes with more enthusiasm than attention to respectability; but who know there is only one day of the year they can do that; and have a quirky respect and regard for it as a spot sacred to the school;

I value the inspiration those young people are, with their energy and idealism and sense of hope.

I looked at the buildings with their different architectural styles and thought of the valued contributions made by our parent community and especially by the Sisters in the early days who moved forward with such persistence in spite of the obstacles placed before them.

I eyed the ingenious spikes atop the balcony ledge beside me, designed to discourage the pigeons from nesting, and thought of Sr Assumpta and her dogged determination in an earlier time to get rid of the pigeons with the use of an airgun, and was thus reminded of the women who, in our context, following the call of Jesus Christ, gave their lives for the education of the young women and men. And sometimes suffered much personal hardship in a highly disciplined form of religious life, who grieved so much in accepting some of the radical shifts after Vatican II – a tension that was so aptly portrayed in the TV series (Brides of Christ", much of it filmed in the very space below me);

I looked to my right and saw the bell tower and though the bell no longer tolls, I could recall the sound of it ringing out in a previous era, summoning the Sisters to prayer in measured tones, or indeed through a curious combination of dongs and tinkles, to the front door or phone. If only our communication systems were so simple today! (As a young sister at the end of the rank, mine was something like 7...9 and you have to listen quite attentively to get that right!) But I still recall the sister who was most regularly on duty answering the phone and door, and her unwavering courtesy and hospitality, which was a model for me both as a student and later a sister.

I looked at the grotto, that symbol of Marian devotion found in so many Australian and New Zealand church and school properties and thought of the photos I'd seen and indeed been part of where the Children of Mary lined up to have their photos taken, symbolising a piety that is not understood by most of the people who pass by the grotto today. But I remembered too the staff and families I have seen walking past the grotto, and pausing for a moment in front of Mary's statue or briefly laying their hand on Bernadette as she kneels in front of

Mary, as though asking for grace for the day ahead or a benediction as they leave for home. (An incident last week when the statues were vandalised, thankfully not a lot of damage.)

I soaked up the stillness and peace of the scene below me, it being Sunday and thought of how fortunate we were in that our school, our city, our nation was at peace, in contrast to the struggles of nations both near at hand and far away.

I walked back into the office and saw on my notice board a photo taken of a group of staff who attended the last pilgrimage to the lands of Dominic run by our school back in 2004. It was of eight women, all of them ex-students of the college and currently teaching with us. And so I thought of what I value in the handing on of that tradition of Dominican education and how quietly confident I felt that these fine women, and other women and men who have joined us, so individual in personality and gifts would keep the flame of Dominic's charism alive mid the realities of change and declining numbers of the congregations.

Lest you think I am about a journey of nostalgia in what I wish to say, that is not my intention. But I needed to stay for a moment or two with these thoughts, to anchor myself in a contemplative moment so that I could with some purpose look to the future and its challenges.

I needed to think about what gives meaning to what I do. Beneath what is observable to the eye are the deeper images that help me to understand who I am what I do.

ACTIVITY

In your professional role – what do you value as teacher, as support person?

- What inspires you?
- What challenges you?
- Where do you find support?

One of the principles that form the basis of what I value is that I know that I am but a custodian, standing at a point of transition. In my context the school of which I am part is one that is based on a particular religious tradition – catholic – committed to the good news of the gospel and trying to be open to the challenge that the gospel of Jesus offers. I do it in a particular way, as part of the tradition of Dominic. That tradition weaves with the thread of my story; it is but one of the many traditions making up the religious orders within our church and contributes to an enlivening and engaging history.

It is in the context of that Dominican story and the quality of hope that permeates it, that I speak to you today and draw on the writings of people like Timothy Radcliffe, Mary O'Driscoll, Margaret Wheatley Professors Hedley Beare and Keith Walker to speak about the values and the challenges for our schools.

In our contemporary culture we can be immobilised by a culture of fear, and we can see it reverberating within the culture of our schools: parents afraid for their children, wrapping them in a blanket of security, failing to let them be risk-takers at any level; young people who are afraid for the future and feel so strongly the pressures of their peers. Just the other morning I heard a news reader commenting on a recently released study of the fears of young people. The four top fears were: being hit by a car, bombs, burglars and terrorists. Our staffs are fearful of the repercussions of some of the compliance issues, or the expectations of parents or how they are going to juggle a myriad of differing demands in their personal and professional lives. All of us afraid in a world that seems to be growing in the expression of violence, ecological disasters and inhumanity towards one another. Such fear can permeate our lives, paralyse our actions, leading us and those with whom we work to wrap ourselves in a fierce individualism, introspection or cynicism. I heard a good description of a cynic the other day: a person prematurely disappointed in the future.

How can we challenge that climate of fear which has so many manifestations? In our context as a Christian community, it is surely by building an environment of hope. In her book "Finding Our Way" Margaret Wheatley describes it like this:

"As the world grows ever darker, I've been forcing myself to think about hope. I watch as people far from me and near me experience more grief and suffering. Aggression and violence have moved into relationships, personal and global. Decisions are made from insecurity and fear. How is it possible to feel hopeful, to look forward to a more positive future?"

And she goes on to reflect on the connections between hope and fear, that anytime we hope for a certain outcome, and work hard to attain it, we introduce the fear of failing or of loss.

Timothy Radcliffe in his latest book “What is the Point of being a Christian” laments the push among politicians at both the national and global levels to push ‘the politics of fear’. Their efforts can have many unintended consequences. Fear he says, dissolves society and undermines citizenship. We don’t have to go very far to see this expressed in our Australian society and I’m sure New Zealand would have similar examples.

Writers on this quality of Hope are fond of quoting Vaclav Havel, the political prisoner of conscience who went on to become the President of the Czech Republic, who describes hope “as a dimension of the soul, an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out, the ability to work for something because it is good, regardless of the outcome.

Reflecting on our own Dominican tradition, Mary O’Driscoll, an Irish Dominican sister who presented at our congregational chapter last year, speaks of Dominic and the dream he had as he stood on the hill overlooking Prouilhe and experienced the Signadou, sign of God. That vision, that dream led him to establish the community of women in a place that would become known as the cradle of the Order. But that original vision was followed by about ten years of apparent futility around the area of Prouilhe and Fanjeaux. It was a long period when nothing seemed to happen or to change. Mary quotes the Dominican historian Vicaire who says that in this period Dominic achieved very little or even nothing at all in some places, by his preaching, and that there was a melancholy atmosphere of suspicion, fear and failure.

However, Dominic remained faithful to the vision despite an apparent lack of success. Quoting the Dominican theologian Albert Nolan Mary reminds us that “our hope does not depend on success; our hope is that God will act through us”. Perhaps we need to remember that line at a time when we feel discouraged about the fact that our schools are pushed so hard by so many influences to be successful at what we do. This is the hope she says that bore Dominic forward in the pursuit of his dream. For all of us there are times like that. How do we respond when nothing seems to work for us. And very pertinently how do we help our staff and our students develop the positive value of hope that can grow out of the experiences of failure, of loneliness, weakness or fragility. Failure, fear, weakness are read so negatively today and by and large our society has little truck with them, either preferring to trumpet the failure of others through the media or else refusing to recognise the experience. We see modelled the behaviour of our political leaders keeping silent or in denial when an open admission would allow some growth to occur. Commenting on some of the attitudes in Australia’s so-called ‘open society’. I heard a recent interview where a visiting academic described an open society as an imperfect society that holds itself open to improvement, adding that he thought we all act on the basis of imperfect understanding.

How do we nourish the quality of hope in the midst of fear? If I go back to Margaret Wheatley for a moment; she speaks of her experience of what happens when you let the fear go, and gives the example of a project she is involved with, centred in Zimbabwe a country where the people are suffering so intensely and have such cause to be fearful. She writes of the people with whom she works; “we’re learning that joy is still available, not from the circumstances but from our relationships. As long as we’re together, as long as we feel others supporting us, we persevere.” So in the communities of our schools we need, at the core of our schools, like-minded people who sustain each other in building a climate of hope. Recently I heard a Uniting church minister who is a school chaplain exhorting a group of school Principals to be “Dealers in Hope”.

Dominic, buoyed by his deep trust and hope in God that if it was God’s will it would come to fruition in God’s time and place must have had a similar experience to that referred to by Margaret Wheatley. We know that he enjoyed the companionship of this small group of women and that little by little there were men who shared his vision. He had a joyful countenance, we’re told by the early witnesses at his canonization.

Mary O’Driscoll, quoting Jonathan Sachs speaks of an ecology of hope. “There are environments in which it flourishes and others in which it dies.” As people engaged in Dominican education perhaps one of the best things we can do is to build an environment where hope can flourish.

What would our schools be like if there existed in each one an environment of hope? Timothy Radcliffe has reminded us on occasions that our centres of study should be “schools of hope”.

In an excellent monograph prepared for the Australian Council for Educational leaders, Prof. Keith Walker from the University of Saskatchewan reflects on fostering Hope. I liked this because while we can enjoy the

opportunity to reflect on the quality of hope in our schools, what does it mean in reality; in the jargon of the Federal Government's accountability/compliance requirements, what are we value-adding if we say our schools are environments of Hope? Is it measurable?

In his analysis, Professor Walker provides research findings, built particularly around the qualities of leaders in schools to be generators of hope. He describes one particular model of hope developed by researchers which is too complex to describe in detail here, but as part of its composition suggests six dimensions of hope.

The first is the affective dimension – when people feel supported in their environment their confidence increases and they are more likely to grow in trust, optimism and sense of purpose; but it is interesting that he points out that feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, nervousness and vulnerability do co-exist with the positive emotions and can ebb and flow according to one's experiences and perceptions.

The second dimension is the cognitive and this is around the processes of reflection, examination and assessment. Hopeful people consider realistic possibilities, recall past experiences and use imagination to attain their goals.

The third is the behavioural dimension. Hopeful people tend to display a high sense of mental energy; their hope is a catalyst for action; they tend to attain their goals because of a resilient disposition.

The fourth dimension is the affiliative and here meaningful relationships beyond self – with God and others are the components. Hope is born, nurtured and sustained in relationships. Through this dimension people experience a sense of belonging and interdependence.

The temporal dimension is the fifth and refers to the fact that hope is directed towards the future but is influenced by past and present experiences.

The last dimension he speaks of is the contextual dimension which reflects the life circumstances of one's experience. Some find hope in the most disastrous of circumstances – I've often been amazed when hearing about people who have suffered greatly at their ability to think positively about the long term – for example, the family of little Sophie Delosio, so badly injured in two accidents. What is the quality of hope at work there? Certainly for us as Christians our faith is built upon the story of Jesus whose death on the cross was the moment of redemption for humankind.

Professor Walker is very clear that our responsibilities in schools is to be hope-givers. He concludes that where learning is being transformed, hope is happening. And I'd like to share with you just a summary of his research findings.

We hear much these days about transformational leaders and transformational learning. I just love some of his reflections about being a learning community and relating his points to a fundamental consideration of the different dimensions of Hope.

For example, he quotes one researcher on the need for wakefulness among educators; a lack of wakefulness, ie a lack of hope in an anticipated outcome in a school is expressed in habitual activities, domination, feelings of powerlessness, indifference, drift, impulses of expediency, bland carelessness and self-doubt.

In another section, he says that in a flourishing learning community all are learners and all are educators. The task of the leaders is to make sure that the strategies, processes and systems are in place so that the educators are touched with inspiration and mobilised to form relationships and thereby transform the school into a learning community.

Towards the end of his paper he reports on a study he and other colleagues have been engaged in about building capacity as learning communities and what have been the learnings about fostering an environment of hope. He writes about a number of factors and practices that assist in building capacity for learning and he describes hope-filled leadership as being a pivotal component of the process. In schools that build themselves as strong learning communities the research highlighted the following characteristics as being evident.

The first is shared understanding and responsibility. In good learning communities the staff shared an understanding of teaching and learning, developed by sharing strategies and by taking collective responsibility for student learning and having a vision for it.

The second aspect was to find that teachers in hope-building schools reflect on their practices and examine alternatives. "The effective practitioner cast their gaze not only on past performances but on future possibilities and potentialities." In these schools there were adequate resources as well as investment in professional development. This last was seen as a direct investment in the future.

Another factor was currency. Staff kept themselves current on the latest research in teaching and learning. Dialogue was important in thinking about the future. In high capacity learning schools there were greater opportunities to learn and to learn from each other. Difficulties encountered today became expectations about how something could be done in the future. Every day people were getting better at learning; were active, hope-driven leaders in learning.

In the schools, teachers collaboratively sought ways of improving the learning experiences of their students. Student engagement in their learning was high. Leadership in these schools was distributed in that it built a culture of community and there was consensus around the vision and mission of the school. Parental and community involvement in the schools was high.

There was coherence to the work of the schools. The emphasis on teaching and learning was always on the agenda. Hope was fostered that helped to make sense of the daily efforts, the interpersonal interactions. And he concludes by suggesting one test of any initiative or innovation around enhancing learning. To ask the question, does this inspire hope where we need it?

He leaves us with three simple questions:

- What hinders hope for you and your colleagues today?
- What are your hopes and the hopes of those with whom you work?
- How might others be directly encouraged and brought to maturity in their hopefulness with and through your leadership?

That description of the significance of Hope within the educational context could apply to any good school across the countries from whence we come. The challenges are certainly there, and so are the values to aspire to. I'm sure in the Australian schools here at least we have all complied with the Government regulations to hang our Values poster – values of care and compassion, a fair go, freedom tolerance, respect, etc. Does the thread of our Dominican story have something more to add to that, a particular viewpoint that contributes to our world-view?

If I might return for a moment to that image of Dominic standing in contemplative silence at the hill top of Fanjeaux, gazing down to the place where Prouilhe would be established, and from which point his future companions, the itinerant friars would be sent to preach the gospel. A capacity, founded on hope to take the long view was surely a natural part of Dominic's make-up because of his upbringing. Spending a week at Caleruega a few years ago, where my bedroom looked out on the broad Castilian plain and on the long straight road going towards the town of Aranda de Duero, it was reinforced for me, as writers have mentioned, that the context of his growing up would have given him a sense of broad vistas, a capacity to be open to the world around him. Just as, from his vantage point at Fanjeaux, he would have looked down at the point of the crossroads below, setting off in the four directions of the compass, sowing in his mind, the dream that the friars would, before long set off for the newly established universities of Europe and beyond.

Flowing from that concept of building our schools to be environments of hope, linking it to our Dominican story, I see one of the great challenges for our schools is to build a spirit of openness to the world around us, to recognise the global nature of our times, to be outwardly focussed in our thinking, to encourage our students whatever their ages to be connected, to recognise and build a culture of interdependence.

What are some simple examples of where this is happening or could happen? What are some of the challenges for us? I recall a saying of Maria Harris, that fine lecturer in Religious Education – “touch Bombay and Sydney trembles”, a saying I used to quiz my students about, or her advice to teachers that every teacher should teach with a map of the world in their classroom. I was reminded of this just recently when I spent a Saturday interviewing prospective staff in the office of the Principal of St Charbel's, a school close to ours and one in the Maronite tradition, educating about 1000 children, K-12. A large map of the world dominated the wall opposite me. In an idle moment or two in the interviewing process as I listened to applicants express their beliefs about teaching and learning and the mission of St Charbel's, I contemplated the distance between Lebanon and Sydney, and thought of the experience of pain and suffering that had so recently engulfed the families of this school, where some 115 of their students had been in Lebanon at the time war broke out.

That reminder raises other questions and challenges: how combat the entrenched views, the rigid ways, the tribalism that we see reflected in our contemporary society. Fear and suspicion of those who are different can be palpable at times, in our schools and certainly in our communities. I am reminded of the impact of building a sense of inclusiveness and acceptance of the other of the experience that some students from Commonground had in recent months – your students who travelled to Tallong to share in a some days that deepened their understanding

of what it means to be part of the Dominican family. The session that had most significance for these young people came with a visit from several families from St Lucy's, who along with Jo Karaolis and Beth Gilligan shared with those gathered what it meant to have a child with a severe disability, and of the love and courage of those families. It had such a profound impact on the young people gathered. Anita tells me that a number of the schools in writing back commented on the fact that they have now made contact with a school or centre for children with disabilities, near to themselves. What an eye-opening and heart-opening experience for these young people. And I have no doubt that the families from St Lucy's were strengthened and encouraged anew by the warm support and interest they received from their visit with the students. Such a simple way of reaching out, but so far-reaching in its consequences.

There is a Dominican program run in the US that offers each year a Preaching Workshop for high school students. Last year through some enquiries I was sent the CD of the two guest speakers; one was Margaret Ormond and the other Timothy Radcliffe. Both of them addressed, with the young people, the need for them to be outward looking and open to difference and in a gentle way challenged them to balance the tendency found among some US citizens to see themselves as the centre of the universe. Both speakers encouraged the students to learn and enter into the stories of communities outside their own country; to travel more widely, to use the internet as a means of connection.

A further challenge for us in this context, with our calling to be preachers of the word, of truth is to examine the way in which language is used to define the insider and the outsider; how we use it. Timothy Radcliffe, again in his latest book says the challenge for us to purify how we speak of strangers, so that our language may be stretched open, and draw close to the wide-open spaciousness and hospitality of the word of God. I think this is a big challenge for us in our schools, both among the students and the adults of the community. Ours should be inclusive spaces where there can be dialogue about ideas, where the inclusive nature of what we are about is reflected in the language we use; where the building of a spirit of community becomes a mark of who we are.

Many of us are familiar with that story of the early Dominican missionaries to South America. The story of Fr Anthony Montesino who preached against the injustices and inhumane treatment of the native Indian people. "With what right ..." The community planned what he would say and chose one of the best preachers to preach the Easter Sunday sermon. Then when the conquistadores complained to the Prior – he was able to say Fr Anthony preached but did so on our behalf.