



Yorkminster Park

BAPTIST CHURCH

Our Vision - Creative Teaching

Sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Peter Holmes on Creative Teaching

Our sermons during these recent Sunday mornings have had a special congregational focus in that they have been taken from the Church Vision and Mission Statement. We have used this Statement as our text, as it were, and preached on various aspects of it. In our Vision Statement we say that we will implement the vision in a number of different ways. This morning we come to that particular way that is described in the Vision Statement as "creative teaching". Let me read to you what it says:

We will establish and maintain a structure for Christian Education appropriate for all ages and for all stages, which facilitates a deeper knowledge of Christian narrative, doctrine and practice.

This morning I want to engage with you on the subject of teaching. Wouldn't you say, and I'm sure you would, that a great teacher in any sphere of life is worth his or her weight in gold to the student? A great teacher leaves a life-long mark upon the attentive student. We remember how he or she said it, and we remember what he said. Sometimes there may have been a touch of eccentricity to his ways. Perhaps he had a curious voice, this great teacher of ours. Perhaps he walked up and down the classroom in a restless kind of way. Perhaps he had other idiosyncrasies, but he made the subject live. He made the subject live whatever it was. He made it live in a way that we have never forgotten and which has given to us a life-long interest in whatever that subject was.

Henry Jones was a poor boy from the valleys of Wales, but he was a bright boy. Around about the end of the last century he won a scholarship to Glasgow University. He came from a tiny little Welsh village described in an almost unpronounceable name as Llangernyn. When he came to Glasgow he sat in the classes of the then great British empiricist philosopher, Edward Caird. Writing later about the influence of Caird upon his life, Jones wrote this: "I was born in Llangernyn in 1852 and born again in 1876 in Edward Caird's classroom". It was as if he had entered a new world of ideas and insights. He had been given a fresh world to explore in the great philosopher's classroom. So much so that he said he had been born again intellectually in that classroom.

William Barclay was awarded a first class honours degree at the University and on receiving that degree he said: "I would have been glad to take my degree hood and cast it at the feet of my teacher, Geordie Robertson". A great teacher is always remembered.

When I turn to the gospels I get this picture of the master teacher and his students. Time and again in the gospels Jesus is described as a teacher. There can be few higher vocations in this life, than to be a teacher. "When he saw the crowds he went up on to a mountain side and sat down and He began to teach them, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God". He taught them to pray saying "Our Father who art in heaven". He taught them as one who had authority and not as the scribes. Even his enemies speaking words of sarcasm about Jesus, spoke more than they knew about the truth when they said to him: "We know that Thou art a teacher come from God, for no man sayeth the things that thou sayest".

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So here was Jesus, the master teacher. This teacher had a class of students. They are what we call the twelve disciples. The word "disciple" comes from a Greek word which means "learner" or "student". Someone who is being trained or someone who is being taught. I can well imagine, of an evening, in Galilee, around the campfire, the master teacher and his students gathered around Him. They would enter into dialogue in a kind of Socratic method of teaching. As they shared together and spoke together, perhaps Jesus would illustrate the truths by telling them one or other of the stories that we've come to call the parables. Or perhaps one or other of the other great sublime truths from the lips of Jesus would first find their formation around that campfire in Galilee. The disciples would ask him the questions that appear throughout the gospels and he would begin to give them the insights and the answers. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Teacher, who shall be the greatest in the Kingdom of God? Teacher, when will the Kingdom come and what will be the sign of it?" All these questions, one after the other and Jesus sharing with them. So you see that call that came to the fishermen, for example, by the Sea of Galilee; that call that requested them to leave their boats behind them and follow Him; that call actually took them into a school of learning with Jesus, the rabbi, the master, the teacher.

That is a model for the Christian church. That is a model for us here in this congregation. For we too have heard the call of the Master, and we have responded to that call in faith and that is the basis of everything. Without that, nothing else follows. If that's where we are, then we are the successors of these first learners in the school of Jesus. As they were called into a fellowship of learning and teaching, so too are we.

Living in the Christian faith is, I believe, a life-long learning curve that goes on and on through all the experiences and decades of our lives. We never become post-graduates in the school of Jesus Christ. There is always more to learn, however much we know, however diligent we are and knowledgeable we are in our study of scripture and the other aspects of the Christian faith. We will never outgrow the need to be learners and students in the school of Christ.

I sometimes hear about great golfers who return home, perhaps after a competition when they haven't done as well as they would like to have done. They go back to have further lessons from their coach or from their teacher. These are world-renowned golfers. These are the great names – Jack Nicklaus, Tiger Woods, Greg Norman and the rest. You would think perhaps they have nothing else to learn about golf – but no – they go back and say, "I have to have a session with my coach to straighten out my swing or to get my putting back on track". Always more to learn. Sometimes I hear of great artists, great singers or musicians who again go back to their coach, their teacher. Their teacher may be an unknown name – they may be a world-renowned name, but they go back to their teacher because there is always some flaw to be sorted out, some weakness to be repaired, something else to learn and to know. The learning never seems to end.

My friends, it is like that in the Christian life, in the life of the spirit. We remain learners right to the end. What is the subject of our learning? What is the syllabus in this school of faith in which throughout faith we are all enrolled; this life-long continuing education of the mind of the soul? What is the subject? What is the syllabus? First and foremost I would say and upfront beyond everything else, we need to learn and relearn and learn again the facts of our faith. Towering over everything else there is the great fact of Jesus Christ. The story about Jesus is the scaffolding which supports that faith and gives it

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expression. That is basic. If we don't learn that then we are rather like children who may have all manner of interesting educational experiences, but in fact have missed out on the basic "three r's".

So we all need again and again to take up, for example, Mark's gospel. Mark's gospel which is the earliest, most graphic and most journalistic of the gospels. To take it up again and begin at the beginning and learn, for example, how Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God, as Mark says very early on in his first chapter. But learning the facts of the faith will not only be about learning the story of Jesus, but also about learning the beginnings of the meaning of the story of Jesus Christ. Jesus came into the world. Why? Jesus died on the cross. Why? The risen presence of the Lord was known by the disciples after that. How and why and for what purpose? Jesus left the community behind him in the persons first of all of the twelve disciples and then the other believers. He left the community behind him and what we call a church now. What is the nature of that church? What is its function and purpose? These are all questions that stem out of the story and lead us into understandings and insights about the meaning of the story. What it's all about? The more that we acquire some kind of learning about the basic facts of the faith, the more we are able, as Peter says in his letter towards the end of the New Testament, to give a reason for the hope that is within us.

We also need in the school of Christ to learn about the application of our faith in our lives, from day to day. There is a great difference, isn't there, between pure science and technology? Technology is the practical application of pure scientific research. In the Christian faith, there are, if you will, the objective facts about Jesus Christ. There is, if you like, the science of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. But then there is the application of it. There is the application of it in all the dimensions of our lives: in our relationships, in our values, in our homes and in our church, in our ethical and political and social attitudes, in the underlying assumptions which direct us and prompt our lives from day to day. Christian learning or Christian teaching on these issues is not necessarily transparent. It is not necessarily unified or totally agreed. There will be ambiguity and there will be Christian people on either side of very hot issues in our society today. Nonetheless we have to be exposed to the various ways in which people understand the application of the Christian faith to their lives and on the basis of our exposure to that, make a value judgment and take up our own stance and have our own conviction. That is the way in which we try to apply the Christian faith to the day by day realities of our lives in Toronto towards the end of this century. Through the teaching that we receive and through the learning that we acquire. Always we need help to answer the question: what does it mean for me personally, and perhaps radically, to follow Jesus, in my life, in this time and in this place?

Some of you know the writing of Henri Nouwens who died some time ago. I've been reading his journal off and on over these past days, and very moving it is. The question which haunted Nouwens was the question: "Given my life, given the gifts that I have, how can I really follow Jesus? How can I give expression to my discipleship? How can I apply my faith in my life?" That was the question which haunted him. As he thought about it and as he prayed about it, he departed from the academic life that he was living. He was a professor both at Yale and at Harvard, and that's where he found his vocation for some time. But as he asked this question about the application of following Jesus to him, he turned his back on all of that. He departed from the doors of academia, and as many of you know, he came and lived in a community, not very far from here, of mentally handicapped children and older people, a community called L'Arche. There he lived with the poor and with the handicapped because he felt that for him that was what it meant to follow Jesus in a radical and personal way.

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We all have to face and address that question. Obviously very few of us will give the answer that Nouwens was able to give. He was on his own; he was celibate; he was a priest; he was a monk. He was able to do that. But nonetheless the underlying principle of the application of our faith in our lives and to our day, is an urgent one for all of us. We learn to address that question in the learning and teaching experience of the school of Christ.

So the life-long learning curve takes in these things. If these are the things that we have to learn, men and women, where shall we be taught them? This brings us back to our Mission Statement, does it not? It speaks about a church where there would be structures for Christian education, appropriate to all ages and stages, facilitating a deeper knowledge of Christian narrative and doctrine and practice. I think I would have to have to confess that notwithstanding the devoted and dedicated work of many teachers in Christian education structures, in all our churches, don't we sometimes feel disappointed at the minimal return that all this investment has given us in our congregations and in our churches? Children who perhaps emerge from our Christian education schemes with very little more than a hazy knowledge of Jesus; adults with a flimsy knowledge of the Bible. Most of the adults who have been through our Christian education schemes have no idea or knowledge at all of the biblical scholarship, for example, of the last hundred years or so. Notwithstanding all the good things, all the quality and dedication, we always feel that we need to make a better job of our Christian education schemes.

Now we who preach from the pulpit have a responsibility in this. There must always be an element of teaching in preaching. Preaching is certainly more than just doling out dollops of doctrine. It involves inspiration, comfort, the call to discipleship and many other things. But it certainly should have an element of teaching in it. It bothers me that much contemporary preaching has degenerated into some kind of form of narrative story-telling without any theological meat in it. We have tried to address that here in this congregation by our sermons on interpreting the great texts, for example, and preaching through Mark's gospel, which I think we did a year ago or so. Trying to engage the congregation at a somewhat deeper level. Making a contribution to our understanding of our insights and the theology of the faith. Beyond all that we can do and say in the pulpit, there have to be classrooms of faith.

Here in this church again, we have a splendid opportunity to make a fresh start in the task of inter-generational Christian education. Once this north wing of our building is renovated we will have quality surroundings and resources and facilities for our Christian education. I would appeal to the congregation to make the maximum use of these resources so that we will have quality teaching; so that we will have a quality environment; so that children don't notice some great disparity between these surroundings and the surroundings of day school. I would ask you to commit yourself, inasmuch as you can, to the vocation of learning more and being taught more about our faith. Paul speaks about the need for us to grow, spiritually and intellectually, into the fullness of the stature of Jesus Christ, our Lord. We have a great new opportunity to make a fresh start in all of this in this church. So the church becomes an academy of Christian teaching and learning.

Finally this. Did you ever think about the disparity between what these original learners and disciples were when they first met Jesus and what they became after the years spent in the fellowship of Jesus, under the tuition of Jesus, the great master teacher, and indeed their life in the spirit? The change that came over them. Think of Peter, for example. There was Peter. Initially he was nothing more than what Lloyd C. Douglas described as the "big fisherman". He was impulsive and a spiritually illiterate man. His idea of Christianity was to assault Malchus, the servant of the high priest in the Garden of Gethemene

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on the Thursday night of Holy Week. But then, read the books towards the end of the New Testament. The two books that are called by his name. Read these books and there you find the refinement of Peter. There you find the man whose mental and intellectual energies and spiritual energies had come alive so he understood what the life and death on the cross, the resurrection and the kingdom of Jesus Christ meant. This big ignorant fisherman had become a great apostle and teacher of Christ's church. His mind and soul had been deepened immeasurably under the influence of the great master Teacher, Jesus, the Lord.

Let this church, let all our churches, be academies of intelligent faith, centred in Jesus Christ, rooted in the Christian tradition and applied to our contemporary lives day by day.