

The Armitage Lecture 2014

Given by Dr Timothy Wright, Headmaster of Shore School on 22 August 2014

Excellence-An Augustinian Tension

Teach me, my God and King,

In all things thee to see,

And what I do in any thing,

To do it as for thee:

George Herbert *The Elixir*

Your eyes participate in the light and so you see. Do they close? You have not diminished the light. Do they open? You have not increased the light.

Commentary on John 39:8

If you investigate the website of almost any school in the Western world you will find some reference to excellence. It

is largely undefined and perhaps that is unremarkable given that few organisations would publicly commit themselves to mediocrity. However, we should not uncritically consider this concept. If we give credence to Charles Taylor's concept of the social imaginary and adapt it as *The accepted (even if unconsciously so) and acted upon ways of living and thinking that reflect our ingrained cultural sense of what it means to flourish as a human being* then, if it is any central value of a school community, **Excellence** will form a pedagogy or liturgy of desire, to use J K A Smith's memorable phrase. Our concept of human flourishing will absorb and be shaped by this value. And if it is undefined it may be a powerful driver of both intended and unintended consequences.

Or, to argue in the secular terms of Pierre Bourdieu,

Excellence can be an *habitus*, one of those “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures,

that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations...” The concept will shape the institution, and if left undefined, or defined simply in terms of worldly performance or selfish outcome, will take the institution towards worldliness and selfishness, all the while appearing to be perfectly laudable and worthy.¹

If this is true then then a constant emphasis on excellence without true reflection or Christian clarification will drive us towards a worldly and culturally defined form of excellence.

To avoid the sin of ingratitude I need to make the following acknowledgements at the beginning of this lecture. Last year I had the opportunity to sit at the feet of David Smith from Calvin College for two courses at Regent College. I had met and heard David during my sabbatical leave in 2009. David introduced me at these times to the writing of the Catholic

¹ Bourdieu, P *The Logic of Practice*, p 53 Stanford University Press, Stanford CA 1990

theologian Paul Griffiths whose works *Religious Reading* and *Intellectual Appetite* are deeply referenced during this lecture. I have been also influenced by Parker Palmer whose work *To Know as we are Known* in some ways prefigures Griffith's later writing, as well as JKA Smith, Charles Taylor and of course I must acknowledge a prior obligation to St Augustine.

We need to think about what is happening in a school. Why do we educate and what is the Christian justification for an academic education, such as that pursued by the majority of schools in Australia and most schools claiming a Christian heritage? This is not a trivial question, even if we do not think about it often.

Genesis 1-11 Creation, the Image of God and the Cultural Mandate/Work

The creation narratives of Genesis and the subsequent chapters before the story of Abram begins are deceptively well known in the Christian world and beyond. We often think we know them well and we equally often think that we know exactly how others may interpret these stories. How one views the status and interpretation of the stories leads to a wide variety of conclusions and controversy ranging from the validity of evolutionary theory to the role of women in family, church and society. However, there is little contest that these early chapters of the Bible frame a large part of the Christian theological mindset and indeed underpin, albeit these days almost invisibly, the broader culture.²

A key point in the Creation narrative of Genesis 1 is the famous statement:

So God created mankind in his own image,

in the image of God he created them;

male and female he created them.

²⁸ *God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and*

increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the

fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living

creature that moves on the ground.'

Followed in Chapter 2 by:

⁵ *Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant*

had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the

*earth and there was no one to work the ground,*⁶ *but streams*

came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the

*ground.*⁷ *Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of*

the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,

and the man became a living being.

⁸ Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹ The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.....

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

And

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.’

¹⁸ *The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'*

¹⁹ *Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.*

The concept of man as God's image bearer has often been interpreted in two ways, which are in my view not mutually exclusive. The first is the interpretation as the analogy of being (*analogia entis*) in which certain of the attributes of God's being are seen to be reflected in humanity (creativity, relational orientation, sense of moral order for example).

The second is that the bearing of God's image is a *calling*, that is to say we represent God as vice-regents in his world. In the Ancient world it was common for central absolute authority to be expressed through representative rulers and sometimes even by the placing of a stele bearing the king's image in the town or province. This representative sense is captured when we think of humanity as bearing God's image and exercising the authentic call to dominion.

This latter interpretation releases a wonderful truth-that we are co-workers with God in his world. Al Wolters puts it brilliantly:

"The earth had been completely unformed and empty; in the six-day process of development God had formed it and filled it-but not completely. People must now carry on the work of development: by being fruitful they must fill it even more; by

*subduing it they must form it even more. Mankind, as God's representatives on earth, carry on where God left off. But this is now to be a human development of the earth. The human race will fill the earth with its own kind, and it will form the earth for its own kind. From now on the development of the created earth will be societal and cultural in nature."*³

J K A Smith expresses a similar sense:

*But the call is the same: humanity, created in God's image, is called to bear his image as Yahweh's ambassadors, his vice-regents in the territory of creation, by continuing to unfold and unpack all the potential that has been folded into creation. And he calls us to do that **well**, in ways that accord with his norms and desire for the final flourishing of his creation "to the praise of his glorious grace".*⁴

³ Wolters, A M, *Creation Regained*, 2nd Edition, pp 41-42, Eerdmans Grand Rapids 2005

⁴ Smith, J K A, *Letters to a Young Calvinist*, p 74, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids 2010

The first task we see Adam undertake is the naming of the animals. It is not that God needs Adam to name them for His own sake, but delegates this action to humanity as a metaphor for human cooperation in God's creative work.

Adam does undertake the task and in doing so he creates meaning. It is an intellectual and cultural endeavour, and to my mind represents far more than the giving of a name as we understand it today. It is a participation in God's work and in his creation in a way that unfolds meaning.

The importance for us in this preliminary biblical exercise is to establish the truth that learning about our world for our world's sake is in fact entirely consistent with our calling to be God's people. Indeed, if we give due consideration to the ancient doctrine of general providence we understand that all people fulfil God's will for them to bear image as they learn and work. In evangelical circles I believe we have lost

the traditional view that God's sovereignty is not just focused on the acceptance of Christ as Lord and Saviour but in fact extends to the unfolding of his creation to his glory by all human beings. The primary, the first, act of Grace from God is the giving by his volition the creation and placing us as image in it, to unfold and shape it. Our opportunity to learn and to create in this context is a gift to all humanity from God.

So why might there be a tension in the concept of excellence? Surely in our learning and our teaching we ought to do it well?

Excellence of course is not simply about academic performance and results. In Australia and elsewhere we find schools which focus on the performing arts or on sports at an elite level as well as schools with a highly selective intake of

able students. Unfortunately in the English speaking world academic excellence has been conflated in the public sphere with test results, particularly standardised testing. Excellence needs to be reinvested with meaning for it to be useful for a Christian school, or indeed any school.

The Implications of Excellence as an End in Itself

Excellence as an end in itself is a dangerous concept if we operate with a Christian “social imaginary”. This may be initially counter-intuitive particularly if we immediately turn with a proof verse mindset to Ecclesiastes 9:10 *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might* or Colossians 3:17 or 3:23.

The trap is found in our society and culture with its increasingly hard-wired slavery to Luther’s diagnosis of *incurvatus in se*. Humanity curved in upon itself, and indeed

the individual curved in upon himself or herself will readily feed on the alluring appeal that excellence will hold for those who see it as a means of personal fulfilment, personal gain and personal power. What could possibly be offensive about this in a highly individualistic and consumerist culture? Not a lot, given that the culture encourages an egocentric evaluation of all things. Given that the sins of the Church are always those of the surrounding culture we must be cautious.

There are some likely consequences for a culture or social imaginary within the school that seeks excellence simply as an end in itself. Excellence is likely to be construed as an explicit and absolute standard. The value of a person will be measured by their performance and capacity in whichever fields of excellence the school's culture assigns value. Those not able to exhibit such a standard may be undervalued, or, perhaps, not even admitted to the school. We will learn that

my value is not because I bear the image of God, but because I run well, play the violin magnificently or that I am exceptionally gifted at Mathematics. Yet from a Christian perspective such a self-interested way of thinking must be at odds with Biblical ways of thinking and living and runs the danger of anaesthetising us to the fact that all we have and are come from God as gifts of grace.

The contrast we need to draw is based upon the *telos* of our excellence. Is it to furnish well qualified consumers who can exercise power for their own benefit, or is it to produce sharp tools for the kingdom? *“...we can distinguish good discipline from bad discipline by its telos, its goal or end. So the difference between the disciplines that form us into disciples of Christ and the disciplines of contemporary culture that produce consumers is precisely the goal they are aiming at. Discipline and formation are good insofar as they are directed*

*toward the end, or telos, that is proper to human beings: to glorify God and enjoy Him forever”.*⁵

The attitude of the learner to her learning will also be profoundly affected if excellence is seen in and of itself a sufficient *telos*, serving the end results of “material success and the attainment of power”⁶. I find Paul Griffiths has demonstrated that the Augustinian ideas of *curiositas* and *studiositas* are helpfully applicable in this context. *Curiositas* is the ardent desire to know what is unknown and “what it seeks to do with that knowledge is control, dominate, or make private possession of it.”⁷ Even if such a learner cannot sequester the learning entirely for himself, his use of it is likely to be for selfish ends. Under such a mindset the learner regards knowledge, skill, understanding and insight as

⁵ Smith, J K A, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to Church*, p 102 Baker Academic Grand Rapids 2006

⁶ Griffiths, P J *From Curiosity to Studiosness* in Smith D I and Smith J K A *Teaching and Christian Practices* p 106 Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2011

⁷ Griffiths, P J *Intellectual Appetite*, p 20 Catholic University of America 2009

tools for the advancement of self-interest. The learner regards all of her intellectual capacity as a commodity and is consumerist in appetite and application. Perhaps the most practically visible outcome is the dread cry “Will this be in the test?” with the clear indication that if the learning does not have “market” value then it will be disregarded. With a *curiositas* mindset we might emphasise that plagiarism is a problem because it undermines the competitive playing field whereas I will suggest an alternative view later. Such environments may develop an instrumentalist attitude in more than just the scholarly life. I might add that I think the academic project of Modernism has been heavily subject to this flaw. It is a lack of humility. And *curiositas* is the default position of Modernism.

In spiritual terms such an attitude of being “over and above” one’s learning tempts one with the sins of personal pride and

self-sufficiency, both common cracks running through our individualistic culture. It divorces one from the Source of knowledge and understanding and tends to a separation of the learner from what is studied - a relational divorce that reflects the consequence of sin.

Or Biblically speaking: [1 John 2:16](#)

*For everything in the world – the lust of the flesh, **the lust of the eyes**, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world.*

Whether in the classroom or outside, the school will reinforce these deficits when it values performance before the person, when it privileges certain activities or standards as bestowing greater intrinsic value. This is not an argument against the reality of grades, but against the notion that a

straight A student is inherently more valuable than a straight C student.

Augustine, quoted very briefly makes the following point in his 10th Book on the Holy Trinity:

But someone so curious as to be carried away by nothing other than a love of knowing the unknown, and not because of something already known, should be distinguished from the studious and called curious. But even the curious do not love the unknown. It is more accurate to say that they hate the unknown because they want everything to become known and thus nothing to remain unknown.⁸

One reaction to this may be anti-intellectual, not an uncommon feature of Christian sub-cultures. The restriction of reading book lists, the enforced literal interpretation of

⁸ *On the Holy Trinity 10.1.3*

the Creation narratives, the rejection of high art, choosing to perform *Godspell* as “Christian” rather than *Aladdin* which supposedly promotes the occult and other such practices are often seen as providing protection in some sense from the consequences of a seduction by *curiositas* (although the anti-intellectual is most unlikely to have heard of the term).

Lower expectations of academic performance and perhaps conforming to the behavioural norms of the sponsoring denomination may be more common. But this response brings the result of a diminishment of human flourishing , a rejection of God’s Creative gift and a betrayal of the parents who have covenanted for their children to be educated well.

A Christian Alternative

In contrast if we recapture the sense of standing under, submission, implicit in *understand* we will be closer to the Christian truth that our learning shapes and forms us. It will be embedded in humility. Phil 4: 8-9.

⁸ *Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.* ⁹ *Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*

A Christian person will understand that all gifts and talents are given by God to enable us to serve our fellow creatures as we fulfil our calling to be God's image. Our Lord and a biblical theology would encourage us to do our best with

these gifts, to be excellent. Are we caught in an impossible duality?

It is not necessary to see excellence in problematic terms if it is approached from the Augustinian concept of *studiositas*. If *curiositas* seeks possession, “*studiositas* seeks participation”.⁹ Both are intellectual appetites, but they have a different *telos*. One seeks novelty, one enlightenment. One prides itself on its achievements, one on its usefulness. One sees knowledge as a prize to be won, one as a gift to be received. For example, plagiarism seen from a *studiositas* viewpoint is an act of ingratitude.

The studios do not have a lesser desire to learn but, as Griffiths writes, a deep desire to be shaped in intimate engagement with both gift and giver:

⁹ Griffiths, P J *Intellectual Appetite*, p 22 Catholic University of America 2009

*A preliminary definition of studiousness, then, is: appetite for closer reflexive intimacy with the gift. The appetite of the studious may rival that of the curious in ardour; but the former, unlike the latter, treat what they seek to know as iconic gift and thereby as open to and participatory in the giver.*¹⁰

This is not to say that excellence in learning from the outside might look significantly different to casual observation. A good PhD candidate in Chemistry will probably conduct the same experiments and draw the same theoretical conclusions whichever is the underlying driver. However, attitude and *telos* do matter and they transform the learner and the application of the learning.

I lived through an example of this recently when one of my senior boys spoke about his disturbed reaction to learning in

¹⁰ Griffiths, P J, *op. cit.* p 21

detail of *Kristallnacht*. For him the learning raised questions about acting for justice, being courageous and willing to sacrifice for a cause. I was profoundly grateful to have seen him, in reflexive intimacy with his learning, challenged at every part of his person. This is *studiositas*.

Although not a perfect correlation it may be helpful to reflect upon the deficiencies of English. Many languages have two verbs that we translate as *to know*. In French for example we have the verb *savoir*. Primarily this means to know as in to know a fact. Supplementing this understanding is *connaître* which means to know relationally. *Curiositas* does not demand an intimacy with what is to be known or learned but does equate “**knowledge with certainty**”¹¹. In contrast, *studiositas* does demand our reflexive intimacy. As Smith notes: “**From Augustine through Aquinas, medieval**

¹¹ Smith, J K A, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to Church*, p 102 Baker Academic Grand Rapids 2006

theologians were very attentive to the difference between 'comprehending' God (which was impossible) and knowing God (which was possible, because God had given himself to us in terms that could be received).¹²

Reflexive intimacy immediately brings with it the realisation that with a studious mindset, the learner will be reciprocally shaped by the learning. One cannot maintain a detached neutrality: the process of learning will change us. Our knowing will be relational. The expressing of our knowing will also have a reflexive intimacy with others. I have seen teachers reduced to tears by the magnificence of a piece of writing from a student, but every teacher of quality knows that it is the relationships that enable the learning and triggers the emotional response. One of our traditions at Shore which transforms the process of the classroom is that

¹² Smith J K A *loc.cit.*

students file out of the classroom saying thank you, and their teachers reply in kind. It is not a rule, it has just developed over time as “the way we do things here” and it reflects a gratitude for the human gifts that underpin excellence.

Teachers new to the school are deeply impressed by the experience, and casual visitors assume it has all been staged!

But gratitude powerfully shapes the quality of the classroom and the quality of the learning. It opens us up to each other and the knowledge and understanding we are seeking.

This concept echoes powerfully the biblical idea of Wisdom presented most explicitly in the Book of Proverbs.

1 The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

² for gaining wisdom and instruction;

for understanding words of insight;

³ for receiving instruction in prudent behaviour,

doing what is right and just and fair;

⁴ *for giving prudence to those who are simple,*

knowledge and discretion to the young –

⁵ *let the wise listen and add to their learning,*

and let the discerning get guidance –

⁶ *for understanding proverbs and parables,*

the sayings and riddles of the wise.

⁷ *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,*

but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Such a standard of excellence transforms our sense of purpose and motivation. In the context of a doctrine of general providence or common grace we can cultivate an other-mindedness and a call to serve others for every learner, and for those learners who are Christian believers

we can add to that the desire to be sharp tools for the work of the Carpenter.

There is, therefore, a Christian *telos* that what we know and can do will be for the purpose of serving God, most usually by being of service in our world and to others. We can unpack what is enfolded in creation, in human giftedness through our learning, at an excellent level, in a way that honours the giver of the gift and those who will receive the benefits of our learning. This is the basis of a Christian excellence. Our music or sports will similarly honour God and bring benefit to others and such consequences will be intentional. The school production of *Les Miserables* will be a means of engaging our audiences not just with wonder at our talents but in ways that communicate cognitively and emotionally truths about duty, love, justice and honour. It will be an excellent service.

Which brings us back to that glorious metaphysical saint of
God, George Herbert, whose poetry opened the lecture:

All may of thee partake;

nothing can be so mean,

which with this tincture, "for thy sake,"

will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause

makes drudgery divine:

who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,

makes that and the action fine.

This is the famous stone

that turneth all to gold;

for that which God doth touch and own

cannot for less be told.

