



Going back to School

It's that time of year when parents everywhere are dashing about trying to get children ready to go back to school. Have they grown? Does their uniform and PE kit still fit? Do we need new shoes / pencils / pens / books / schoolbags / bus passes? And – new for this year – when do they have to go for their pre-school COVID test?

All of this is new for me, having earlier this year married into a family which includes three amazing stepchildren. As the Revd Mrs Hover and I grapple with all the practicalities involved in getting the children prepared for going back to school, my mind has also become occupied with the question of how we are helping them prepare mentally for going back to school – one of them in a key exam year. It's as ever been a long summer holiday, with prolonged separation from the school community and pattern of life, as well as from many friends. The return to school is a return to community, to fellowship, to structure, that in some ways is most welcome but which brings challenges as well as joys.

In a lot of ways, it's the same for all of us coming out of lockdown. Whatever patterns or structures, relationships and communities we had in our lives were suddenly denied to us, snatched away almost in a blink of an eye. Gradually those activities, places and relationships have been restored to us, but many of us are finding all is not as it was and neither are we. Like schoolchildren after a long summer holiday, we have all got out of the habit of being in a community of people not entirely of our choosing, who are different to us, have other ways of approaching life and the community to us, and that can be challenging to deal with particularly after this long period where we haven't had to deal with those 'awkward people' or the friction that can occur when we find ourselves physically and emotionally rubbing up against other people. We're out of practice, and I've noticed this manifesting in how people relate and speak to one another. People seem less patient, quicker to snap at and speak rudely to people, reacting aggressively to even the smallest of frustrations. I've noticed the same trend in myself towards less tolerance and patience when engaging with others. You may have noticed something similar in your own life and relationships. We've all to a greater or lesser extent gotten out of the habit of being with other people.

It's like we all need to go back to school to re-learn how to live in community with other people, particularly when we experience frustrations or disagreements. As quickly as we learned to grapple with 'Zoom etiquette', now we need to pick up again those old skills of getting along with each other in a way that builds people up, and promotes a co-operative and welcoming, diverse community.

It's interesting in this context to reflect on the people Jesus chose to spend his time with. His closest companions were a real cross-section of society and people who would not normally associate together; fishermen and religious elders, tax collectors for the Roman occupiers and partisans committed to their overthrow, men learning and working alongside women on equal terms, outcasts and beggars rubbing shoulders with the rich and powerful. Inevitably there were flashpoints and conflicts – we find several recorded in the Bible. On each occasion, Jesus cut across the social divide to emphasise the common humanity of each individual, regardless of their social status, gender, race, wealth, or moral standing. Every person was created equal by God, is loved by God and is incalculably precious in God's eyes – and Jesus' teaching was that every person was to be treated accordingly. "Love your neighbour as yourself" were Christ's watchwords, and this was reflected in the varied community of unlikely neighbours that he drew together. It took them 3 years of schooling from Jesus to even start to get good at neighbourliness, and the community of Christ's church today still has many of those lessons to learn – as does each one of us.

In all the preparations we make for getting 'back to normal' after the lockdowns and the pandemic, the hand sanitizers, the facemasks, the lateral flow testing... as we do all that, I wonder if we might spend some time re-educating ourselves on our preparations to engage with other people in a way that values them. Even if our beliefs are not such that we would see each and every person as a beloved child of God, can we nevertheless all learn from Jesus' lead in valuing every person's common humanity, intrinsic worth and human dignity? Are we at this moment treating all our neighbours – every person we encounter each day – in the way we would like to be treated ourselves? Are our interpersonal skills up to the challenge at the moment, or is it time for us too to go back to school to re-learn those important lessons once again?

If you want to know how I answer those questions, well, you'll find me at a school desk near the front! Only no flicking elastic bands at people's ears please; I had enough of that the first time round...

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