

Education for Justice

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'Thank God there are no free schools or printing....for learning has brought disobedience and heresy into the world and printing has divulged them...God keep us from both.' Sir William Berkeley, Governor of Virginia.(1605-1677)

The politics of our times suggest that this sentiment still has its more or less subtle adherents.

I carry in my head that insight of CAA Savastana, the USA author who navigates the intersection of politics, intelligence and human behaviour, best known for his stellar work on political assassinations, 'Two Princes and a King.' He writes 'the difference between a teacher and an activist teacher, is that one is dedicated to offering the ability to think clearly and the other is often committed to destroying that clarity.'

There is, I believe, a truth in that insight worth exploring as we stand at the cusp of formidable planetary changes. It is a given that throughout history, some of the most formative moments, best discoveries, deepest insights, stirring literature, have emerged from the turbulence of the politics of disturbance, of not been bound to the clarities that have defined the times. In our times our systems of education are also caught in the flux of these paradigm shifts. It is thus a moment not of decline but of challenge and potential for teaching. Friedrich Nietzsche, who is usually so pessimistic in his ponderings, gives us this poignant thought: 'One must still have chaos within oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star,'

It is exceptionally striking that Pope Francis has recognised in our era, not only a paradigm shift but an absolute change of epoch. 'We are not living in an epoch of change but in change in epochs, a crisis that affect human beings, but which is also planetary and environmental.' He opened that reality at a conference in May 2021 titled 'Today and Tomorrow: Imagining Theology.' We could well be tempted to substitute 'education for theology' and still keep the integrity of the thought project.

Nelson Mandela once said, nudging our understanding of education and teaching for justice, in that more socially responsible direction: he said so correctly that 'education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.' Here's my point. To predicate such powerful claims on the pivot of education, we must assume that education is more than the traditional 'arithmetic, reading and writing.' It leans, surely more to the contemporary 3 Rs that spoken about in pedagogical circles, and that have the potential to nurture an appropriate education, namely, 'Responsiveness, Resilience and Relationships.'

Just a week or two ago, at the Sunday liturgy we heard that story from Luke [16: 19-31], of Lazarus and the rich man. In many ways it underlines the features of the new epoch which we are entering- at least as much as we can discern its contours, as far as we can recognise it thus far. The stark injustice and the overwhelming realities of poverty, in that story, could not be hidden, they defined the environment and are centre stage in the story. It was inescapable.

Yet in the face of that glaring reality, there was a spirit of indifference. The rich man did not deliberately set out to make the situation worse, he was just indifferent. Pope Francis coined that memorable phrase about the 'globalisation of indifference' He describes it as a dangerous apathy and dehumanisation in society where people are numb to suffering, injustice and human dramas. It is a disease of the heart, a failure to act due to self-interest, and a state where people turn away from those in need.' The correct response says the Pope is 'advocating for a response of feeling, compassion and active engagement, by which he means enhancing the agency of the poor and marginalised.

On the point of agency the story underlines the Lazarus effect. It is most unlikely that Lazarus was born on Dives doorstep, it is more likely that he exercised his agency and took himself to a place where he hoped he could exercise some leverage, strategize effectively for his empowerment. At the very least he prevented Dives from absolving himself from the duty of care and hiding behind the oldest excuse 'we didn't know.' That story surely plays itself out all around us and is the inescapable context for understanding (in the words of Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner 1962) your mission of, 'teaching as a subversive activity.'

An attentive reading of the pathologies in the Lucan story and an awareness of the new sins announced in March 2008 by the Apostolic Penitentiary where The Penitentiary noted that 'while sin used to be seen as concerning mostly the individual, today it has mainly a social resonance due to the phenomenon of globalisation.' The list includes morally dubious experiments including abortion and euthanasia, destroying the environment and pollution, drug taking, contributing to income inequality, excessive wealth, contributing to income inequality and creating poverty. The dominant assertion in all of this is clearly the supremacy of maintain and enhancing human dignity.

Teachers have long understood that every child is a gifted child, ours is the task of finding that gift and growing it. Along with that, this too has been long recognised that a dignity based approach empowers educators to create inclusive spaces, empowering students and disrupting the hegemonic and unequal structures often found in educational institutions. The 'to do' list for fostering dignity is a long one and context often adds more to the list- but practice

has shown that without embracing inclusivity, promoting empathy, modelling respectful behaviour, focusing on empowerment and engaging in constructive dialogue, - the great task of holding onto our dignity. Michael Fox once wrote: 'Ones dignity may be assaulted, vandalised and cruelly mocked but it can never be taken away unless it is surrendered.' Our teaching spaces, the contexts we work in, the connections we make, the consciousness which we develop, must strengthen, [as a first cause] in every man, women and child the utter conviction to never surrender, never capitulate their dignity.

Malcolm X understands the response, and the direction of education, to the new challenge: 'I'm for truth no matter who speaks it. I'm for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I'm a human being first and foremost and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole.' Teaching for justice has indeed a scope bigger, wider than we can imagine....it is justice for and in the world. We live in a world where *sans frontiers* is on the right side of history. Doctors without borders, journalists, philanthropists....our teaching must open the doors to solidarity, to a bold vision of *ubuntu*. We teach to promote dignity but we also teach to strengthen solidarity.

Malala Yousafzai the youngest recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize [at 17] the exceptionally courageous 'education for girls' activist, survivor of two Taliban assassination attempts, picks up the conviction of never surrendering our dignity and embeds it in a solid communal context. She says, 'a book, a pen, a teacher and a child can change the world.' She refuses to hold a limited vision.

Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events and in the total of all those acts, will be written the history of this generation. It is from the numberless, diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is changed. Each time a person stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance. If Athens appears to you great, consider then that her glories were purchased by valiant people, people who learned their duty.'

It is recognised and well understood that dignity, solidarity, responsibility and solidarity are indissolubly interconnected as recognising the dignity of others is the foundation for solidarity which then motivates action to support each other and work for justice for all members of the

human race. Solidarity involves demonstrating unity, shared goals or mutual support through actions, of various kinds.

A helpful syllabus in the educational sphere would include studies of the phenomenon that have shaped recent history, the contexts of our times and the realities that stand before us. The Civil Rights Movements in contexts as diverse as the USA, Philippines, SA and India. It would include workers strikes and bargaining processes, protests and marches and ways on keeping in focus the struggles of our times and policy action and international support and aid. Solidarity is always about being in it for the long haul because the long haul always opens up for us the long view of history.

As such it honours the legacy of past struggles, and of informing the present. It seeks to prevent the repetition of past mistakes and inspires actions that help create a more just society. Many, in this connection quote one of the first persons of colour to push trade union activity in the deeply segregated south of the USA, A Philip Randolph's statement: 'Freedom is never granted, it is won. Justice is never given, it is exacted.'

So as we stand in this "change of epochs," let us see education as part of our Christian vocation: to teach truth with gentleness, to nurture dignity with patience, and to form hearts that can recognize Christ in every Lazarus at the gate.

May our teaching, our learning, and our living all serve that one great purpose — the building of God's kingdom of justice, hope and peace.