

## Good teacher

Mark 10.17-31

‘Good teacher’, says the young man who comes to Jesus. That was how many of his contemporaries saw Jesus. He was a good teacher - a Rabbi to be listened to. I wonder what you think makes a good teacher. When I was a school governor I seemed to have to wade through a lot of documents from the DFE which told us what makes a good teacher, and they seemed to be constantly be re-assessed, re-appraised and re-categorised. I have a sneaking feeling that the teachers who have taught me most over the years would be the bane of any Ofsted inspector’s life. Their future is under scrutiny at the moment. I understand what is being attempted in achieving and maintaining standards, but I think the price we may be paying is precisely that - we are going to get standard teachers, not brilliant, but eccentric ones. And maybe that is a price we have to pay to have generally high quality work in our schools. But I think I regret the decreasing space for the eccentric. I think for example of the brilliant music teacher we had, who knew perfectly well that his B stream pupils were not going to apply themselves to classical music. His method was to lock the door of the classroom (that is illegal now, for a start), unlock the cupboard in which he kept his stock of batman comics, and leave the class to read - and all the while he was playing them music which he wanted them to experience. I suspect he did more for their music appreciation than anyone could have done with more conventional methods.

Let’s look at the qualities of a teacher displayed in our Gospel story. Any good teacher has to know their subject. And Jesus was well taught. I think we should be careful we don’t get a wrong perspective on this. The mind-set of someone who has come to believe Jesus is divine is to superimpose on the Rabbi in Palestine supernatural knowledge. If he had been like that, people would have told us. He wasn’t seen as unbelievably knowledgeable. He was seen as wise. He had learned from his youth up - you remember the story of him getting left behind in Jerusalem when he was a teenager? So he had used the opportunities that all his contemporaries had to learn. He knew the scriptures, and in today’s gospel he quotes them to the young man. His knowledge of God came not only from what he learned, but from what he did. We know he spent time in prayer, being with his heavenly Father (and remember that is how he talked about God - after the resurrection he said ‘I am going to my Father and your Father, my God and your God’ So his was not just book-learning, but experience, And that is clearly how the best teaching happens. Teachers have to communicate their enthusiasm for their subject. And Jesus was a brilliant communicator about what he knew *of* God, as well as what he knew *about* God.

The second thing a good teacher must have is knowledge of their pupils. I recall talking to someone who had recently moved to teaching in a deprived area. She had made assumptions about what the children would be able to do at a particular stage, based on her previous experience. It was a false assumption!

You can't educate (which means to lead people out) unless you know where they are. And schools are getting much better at making those base-line assessments, which makes for better education. But it is not just knowing the level at which to pitch it; it is also knowing the circumstances of the individual. A child in a class who has had a bereavement may not be able to do what they would normally do. They are coping with something individual and private - but if the teacher knows, then allowance can be made, and space given appropriately. We see that happening in the Gospel story: Jesus hears the young man's reply to his original teaching and can read him like a book. He pays attention to him as an individual, and respects him for what he is. It says 'Jesus, looking at him, loved him...'. He used his perceptiveness of where this young man was at to make the next comment, which was going to be devastatingly difficult for the young man to cope with. And we see it too in the way Jesus changes gear, as it were, when he then goes on to talk privately to his disciples. He treats them in a different way, because they are starting at a different point from the young man. Teachers in classrooms call this 'differentiation' - one of the modern buzz words for a concept as old as the hills, and illustrated in what we have heard this morning. But even with this in-crowd, Jesus has to use another teaching technique - he has to repeat himself, amplify, saying the same things in a slightly different way, until they are provoked into a response. There is no point in just telling people something Jesus knows: they have to have taken it in and processed it, as it were.

So the good teacher Jesus knows his topic, he knows his audience, and he also knows how to communicate. But he also illustrates another trait of good teaching in that he leaves questions open. It is not a case of - there you are, take it or leave it. He challenges people to *do* something with what they have heard. I have been to clergy conference after clergy conference over the years. Sometimes we had interesting lectures and presentations - although titles like 'Signs and Hopes in the Political Order' and 'The End of Progress?' didn't exactly fill me with anticipatory excitement! But the value of what I heard was only if any of it affected what I do, or the way I work, or the way I live. Sadly that wasn't the case very often. That may have been my fault, not the speakers' - but that was the reality. Jesus never left people without the aspect of learning which can be summed up as an answer to the question 'So what?' What they heard was supposed to result in action, or change of perspective.

There are many other aspects of good teaching - and whatever qualities I have seen enumerated for teachers today, I would have no difficulty in finding examples of them in the way Jesus taught. He knew how to use illustrations. He knew when people had had enough. He knew when the right time was to take things to the next stage. He knew his limitations - if he didn't know the answer to something, he said so.

All this can be a useful reminder to all of us. The teaching ministry of the church doesn't just take place in the pulpit or the house group. It takes place all the time. We should constantly be learning from that brilliant model we have of religious teaching in Jesus. He knew his subject. He knew who he was teaching, and he expected a response - if we have been taught well, we will be putting what we have

been taught into action. We ought to be different people because of it. May we all learn, and also may we all learn to teach - because we all have to do it. It is not just those who stand up in pulpits who teach. By the way we are, by what we say, by what we do, we are sharing that teaching ministry to each other. Let's all learn to do it better. St Charles Borromeo in the c.16th said this to those who preach and teach. But I believe that it applies equally to every one of us:

“Study diligently and apply yourself...be sure that you first preach by the way you live. If you do not, people will notice that you say one thing but live otherwise, and your words will bring only cynical laughter and a derisive shake of the head.”

What are you learning from your fellow Christians, and what are you teaching them? I leave that question with you.