



Maintaining the life-work balance

We need to start by reading a particularly apposite portion of the Word, Mark 4: 35-41. This incident of the calming of the storm needs to be the setting in which we make our comments on life-work balance and we shall return to it later.

Workload

Someone has said that there are three groups of people: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen and those who don't even know that things have happened! I am of the opinion that teachers generally belong to that group of people who make things happen. Indeed, teachers have a great influence on children and young people during what are, after all, their formative years.

One of the current issues in education is that of the 'Raising Standards and Tackling Workload Agreement' which was signed by most teaching unions and the Government in January 2003. Its intention is commendable, namely to allow teachers to focus particularly on the main task of teaching and learning. It strives to do that by taking certain steps over a period of time to alleviate the demands made on teachers. But the principle in educational initiatives, however laudable it might be, very often gets lost in the practical outworking which follows! I well remember reading a document circulated to schools by the Assembly Government some years ago based on this very topic of teacher work overload – it took me two hours to

read it! Someone has said, 'If you missed the last educational bus, don't worry. There's another one coming in five minutes!'

Culture

Back to the Agreement then. In September 2003 schools were required to cut down on twenty-four tasks that teachers have normally done but could, in many instances, be undertaken by other people such as teaching or administrative assistants. These included tasks such as bulk photocopying, producing standard letters and putting up displays. Whether this has actually happened is more a matter for conjecture than reality at the moment but there does appear to be something of a culture change beginning to take place. The next two years

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will see further – and perhaps more substantial – steps being taken. From September 2004, teachers will not be expected to cover more than 38 hours per year. From September 2005 every teacher will have to be given 10% of school time to plan, prepare and assess. On top of this, Headteachers and others in managerial positions will have to be given an appropriate amount of time in line with their leadership and management responsibilities.

There is much to be said in favour of all these developments. My experience as a teacher and



Headteacher has been that it is very difficult to cope with the multifarious initiatives in education, as well as the innumerable measures for holding teachers and schools to account, among them School Inspectors who produce very public reports every six years or so. Tensions often express themselves in inner protests (frustration, anxiety, dissatisfaction, guilt, self-questioning) and then lead inevitably to an outward expression of those inner tensions (impatience and anger, cross words, no words!). Usually this is at the expense of those who are nearest and dearest. It is at times like these that the enemy, the prince of this world, is enabled to throw his fiery darts and get through the gaps in our defences.

Salvation

I have a certain theory – not particularly original it must be admitted – about modern society. I am not referring to sin and its expression in the general confusion about truth, a lack of values and anti-social behaviour, though it is clear that these are of great concern to the Christian teacher. We are rightly concerned, since such problems express themselves in the lives of youngsters and impinge upon the day to day work of the school. But I have another issue in mind: the growing secularisation of society.

Human beings naturally express themselves in activities and their lack of faith in God means that their energy has to be channelled into all sorts of clubs and societies which then actively compete for a portion of our leisure time. Christians can easily be caught up in this secularisation. It attracts us and tempts us from giving to God's work the attention and time that He requires, and this includes, of course, church meetings and activities. Teachers are generally involved in their community and often carry responsibilities and expectations which society may have of them. In and of themselves these are very often fulfilling roles and certainly not an illegitimate use of time, but there are inherent dangers.

This is particularly so in view of the pressures of work encountered by teachers in their everyday job. Today we live in a society which tends to look for its answers in this world only – the answer to everything is in the social order; it is the remedy for all ills. To this end, education is seen as crucial: it is the means by which to deal with all needs, be



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they personal, social, economic... Therefore children and young people need to be provided with 'skills' to improve their lot, to raise standards, to improve conduct and much more. So much is dependent on the education system. The system itself, as it were, is the means of 'salvation.' Yet Christian teachers know that it is not in human activity, and certainly not in humanistic activity, that redemption is found, but in Christ alone. It is found not in a process but rather in a Person, not in a system but in an Atoning Sacrifice.

Standing our ground

Faith itself is besieged. We seem to be so few in number (at our school I can never remember more than one or two members of staff out of a total of over forty who were Christians). These few carry so many more responsibilities in doing God's work and at the same time they can easily be dejected because Christ's Gospel appears to be refuted and rejected. At times like these we need to be reminded of the picture of the Remnant, a constantly recurring theme in the Bible. I am always drawn to Ephesians 6:13 which says: 'Therefore put on the whole armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.' Its stress on standing is all important because there are two big temptations for the Christian in such situations, and for the Christian teacher more than anyone. The first is to run away. Australia has as its emblem two of its native creatures, the emu and the kangaroo. There is, however, another very good reason for portraying them – because of their physical make-up they cannot move backwards. They can only go forwards. This in itself is a compelling reminder to the Christian of the nature of living and witnessing for God. The second is to run around thinking that proactivity is what is needful (...we must have all these meetings and all these committees to organise them...). When you go to the swimming pool where does the splashing and the noise and the playing around usually occur? At the shallow end of course. It is at the deep end that the real activity – the swimming – takes place. The same is true of the Christian: it is in personal devotion, in those quiet times of meditation upon the Word, of prayer and of direct relationship with God that true spiritual growth takes place. That is what allows one to 'stand.'

So, then, I would urge you to spend time with God, however busy life might be. Pray unceasingly. Read His Word, read about the great Christian lives of the past as well. Seek the company and fellowship of brothers and sisters in Christ. Do not neglect services and prayer meetings or Bible studies.

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You will have noted that I do not offer any new formula. I would just add one more thing – have a routine which will help you with your self-discipline. I tend to get up very early and go to bed early, to organise things well before-hand. Others may have a different metabolism and would prefer a different routine but it helps to keep pace with the demands of teaching. I also rely a great deal on my wife, who is indeed a wonderful source of encouragement and strength. We all need to receive from others; we need a soul mate. The Book of Ecclesiastes says: ‘Two are better than one... If one falls down, his friend can help him up’ (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10).

Calming the storm

Now we can return to the passage from Mark. You will know the details of the incident recorded here. The Sea of Galilee is about 13 miles long and seven and a half miles wide. It is usually very still and quiet, but it lies 680 feet below sea level on a bed shaped out of a deep hollow, with steep cliffs on its eastern edge. Cold air travels down from Mount Hermon which is 9,200 feet high and to the north east, and as the cold air meets the warm air rising from the lake it can create major turbulence and sudden storms. The disciples’ boat is caught here in such a storm – yet Jesus is asleep in the stern. Such is life for us. It can, all of a sudden, become turbulent and stormy, and in such circumstances it is easy for us to be shaken in our faith and think that God is somehow asleep, certainly not tuned in to our desperate needs. The truth however is that He is always in command, as shown here. In Psalm 121:4 it says: ‘He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.’ The disciples then begin to reproach Christ for not seeming to care for them. Do we have similar experiences? We doubt God’s care and concern for us when things become stressful. We reproach Him for His seeming lack of concern rather than reproach ourselves for our lack of faith. But the truth is that everything is under His Lordship, His Authority. Jesus pointedly ‘rebuked the wind and said to the waves, Quiet! Be still!’ You see, He can deal with both wind and wave, both cause and effect! And it has immediate results! A deep, still, profound calm. What an answer to the struggle to find life-work balance!

Trusting God

There are two great fears recorded in this miracle. One is the disciples’ fear of the elements, in spite of the fact that they are experienced fishermen. We can be experienced teachers and Christians, but sometimes things can overwhelm us. Very

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often, it is not the burden that debilitates us but the way that we carry it. We need to remember how vulnerable we are and not take anything for granted. There is nothing that is so much outside human control than the weather! How can we cope, then? By trusting God. And, more to the point, by fearing Him. ‘They were terrified and asked each other, Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!’ God – Jesus – is far greater than we have ever imagined, He has more power and authority than we can ever comprehend. His love is also greater, His grace, forgiveness, concern... much, much greater than we can ever conceive. Christians meet with all kinds of ugly tempests on life’s journey (the whole church is in the boat, all the disciples) but we are reminded that there is One who can conquer all things, internal and external, and make us even ‘more than conquerors’ (Romans 8:37).

The question posed was, ‘Who is this?’ The answer comes in the very next chapter, in verse 7: ‘Jesus, Son of the Most High God.’ May you always be aware of His keeping and His guiding. May you continually be reminded of the truth. As one Welsh hymn writer put it: ‘My Father’s at the helm.’

