

May these words be pleasing and acceptable. Amen.

May I take you back to school for a few stories this morning?

Firstly to Northgate High School in Ipswich who posted an advert for a new position, stating responsibilities would include correcting "spelling mistakes, poor or missing punctuation, incorrect capitalisation" and improving "poor grammar".

"The post holder will check and amend the reports from teachers to ensure that they are well-written and complete before being released to parents." CoE letter.

A *good* report from a skilled teacher can say a lot in very few words: eg

"The improvement in Florie's handwriting has revealed her inability to spell."

Woodwork: "Give him the job and he will finish the tools."

"French is a foreign language to Fowler."

"At least Henry's education has not gone to his head"

"Claudia has an overdeveloped underawareness."

Bobby has all of the knowledge but none of the understanding,

I won a prize when I left Hummersknott School in Darlington – my name is still there, engraved on the wall. 1988. The citation for the prize, was being good at everything but nothing in particular.

The cliché school report is 'must do better' but don't we also say 'God loves a trier?'

This morning's three readings can be read as a school report and someone if getting a good telling off, it is a report of failure. And it's not for lack of trying or of effort, or indeed of potential. The passmark may seem daunting but the support available is truly unlimited. Our student tries, really tries, tries harder than anyone else, but still utterly fails. It is as if the student has opened the exam, has completely misread the question and the answer given is worth no marks.

Who can this report be about? A student who does much but gains nothing. One who knows a great deal but understands very little. Who is this student? This can be our own little exam question this morning. There are three ways we can attempt this question. The first, and simplest, is to keep the paper closed, ignore the report, ignore the readings, ignore the bible. Much of our world does exactly that today and who are we to comment, as if we know the bible well enough ourselves.

Let us say that we are brave enough to open up this report (listen to the words of scripture as we have this morning) and wonder who might it be for. Clearly our student or students are religious. In the gospel they have the value of salt, to preserve and to flavour and yet it has become no longer good, thrown out and trampled under foot. It has the power of light to shine out into the world and yet it has been covered, it is hidden. Our students, wow they work hard: They bow down, they fast, they wear sackcloth and ashes simply to gain the attention of God, their teacher. But their teacher, he is not impressed, they think he does not see them, he does not notice them, and does not appreciate all their hard work.

So who are these students who live busily religious lives but have got such a poor report? At some point we will have to wonder, 'could it be us?' but let's hope that it is not, let's hope that it's somebody else.

Let's go for the obvious: The teachers and scribes and Pharisees, the busy religious people, the bad guys when we were in Sunday school, pompous and self-righteous, standing always against the light and goodness of Christ. Surely it's them? Two issues: The light of Christ *always* faces opposition: We have Isaiah against the leaders 6/700 years before Christ, the travelling missionary Paul against the Christian leaders in Jerusalem, it's not just Jesus in the temple against the Pharisees. The second issue more dangerous:

Let's go back to school: My school. It has that logo of St James on his pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostelo in northern Spain, carrying his shell and rosary beads. It is ancient and precious. It would be upsetting to lose. Feel sorry therefore for St Hugh's school in Lincolnshire, in the news two weeks ago. Their logo is a simple brick wall with a ball. What they have recently discovered is that *their* ancient and medieval symbol represents the story of 'Little Saint Hugh'. Who was he? According to 13th century mythology, he was murdered by a Jewish family after he lost his ball over their wall and was invited to retrieve it. The medieval logic was to invent stories that blamed the Jew, and it has proved easy to make up such stories and also to use readings such as ours today and many others in our bible to criticise those whose faith is Jewish or indeed sometimes any religious people other than ourselves.

There is a simple naming of Jesus (as the good guy) the Christian against the Pharisees (the bad guys) the Jews. We take it as read that this is an odious typecasting but it is persistent and in the forefront of our minds as we remembered, last week, the Holocaust. I am sorry for underlining this point but a reasonably educated church-going visitor (came, once, to our church *here*) and explained the holocaust to me with the following words: That is what happens when you reject the Christ. School report: All of the knowledge but none of the understanding.

It's easy to see the faults in others. Point our readings at others, the enemies of Isaiah, the enemies of Jesus, the enemies of Paul. Can we find room to see if we can learn something about ourselves from this school report? For we are busy religious people. We are familiar with the love of Christ, his tolerance, his incredible patience and acceptance even of the likes of us. But he is also a bit grumpy when it comes to a type of religion that has lots of religious knowledge but little in the way of understanding, little of the understanding of what Paul calls the wisdom of God.

A church such as ourselves is a busy place and we are busy people. A very small amount of the work done here is paid work, the vast majority of our business, of our busy-ness, is voluntary. You do not need a long list of all the things that we do here at St Marys but if I can just give one example to anyone who might be a visitor here this morning as to the scale of what we do: Alongside all the many, many different (I think wonderful) things that we do in putting on worship and keeping the fabric right is the paying of bills the biggest of which is our annual share of £95407! We need busy and talented and wonderful people, a busy church family if we are to keep hold of that which is good. We have busy and talented and wonderful people, we need more to keep hold of that which is good.

And what is it to be good? To be the salt to preserve and flavour our lives and each others lives and the lives of all those who we meet in our homes in our places of work and in our beautiful town of Richmond. And also a light: Not to be a light exalted over others in self righteousness but instead to hold up the light of Christ so that others may see. Can we dare to follow Paul and come to others in weakness and fear and trembling, telling others of Christ crucified, demonstrated in good deeds, not simply words and (just) in the busyness of church. 'Don't just know the word, says St James, put it into practice', and St Augustine commands us to go and preach the gospel and only if absolutely necessary use words. The three commandments of love: Firstly 'love others', secondly 'as you love yourself', and then (hardest of all) 'love others as Christ has loved you.' For he loves you with service and self-sacrifice as demonstrated through Christ crucified, and as a church it is in our sharing and showing that we receive. As we meet in this school of God may we gain a report that shows that we are growing not just in the knowledge of God but also in an understanding of the wisdom of God through the Spirit of God. Are all these just religious words, maybe, but keep this one final mustard seed deep but close as a spark that ignites loving service in our daily lives and share in Paul's excitement: There's a spirit in the air.