

## Can the Catholic School Be a Parable of the Kingdom?

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**F**'ETHOS' IS A NEBULOUS TERM, and in educational circles it frequently gives rise to controversy, as our recent history in Ireland has illustrated. In this article the intention is to explore the idea of Catholic ethos from a scriptural perspective in the hope that these reflections might assist all who are involved in Christian faith-based education to root their policies and practices in a vision that challenges us to think broadly about what it is we hope to achieve in the Catholic school.

Before considering the scriptural material, I want to begin with a kind of parable. As with the parables of Jesus it is intended to provoke thought and reflection.

Several years ago, during a casual conversation with a friend the topic of school ethos arose. The context was a discussion on bullying. My friend recalled an experience she had been through when her daughter was in school many years previously, before the days of anti-bullying policies and even boards of management. It was a local convent school with a religious principal. Her daughter was being bullied and was deeply unhappy, so my friend decided to meet with the principal and outline the seriousness of the situation to her. The

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principal listened carefully, noted all the relevant details and promised to act on the information, telling her that she would be in touch soon. Sure enough, she contacted her within a matter of days and informed her that she had investigated the matter and confirmed that her daughter was indeed being bullied by a particularly difficult student.

Then, to the great surprise of my friend, the principal asked her would she consider sending her daughter to another school in the area. 'Why?' she asked, 'Surely my daughter is the victim here. Shouldn't you be doing something about removing the bully?' The nun replied, 'Should you wish to leave your daughter in this school I fully understand, and action will be taken to remove the bully. However, this is how I see the situation. Your daughter is a very bright, intelligent girl, well supported at home, who will do extremely well in any school. The girl who is bullying her has many problems, but I believe we can help her here. If she is expelled she will have even greater difficulties and very little support elsewhere. So, even though I know that your daughter has been wronged, I have every confidence she can overcome this. At the same time, I am deeply concerned about the future of this other child. Please consider what I am suggesting and come back to me with your decision.'

Eventually, after her initial shock and even dismay at this response, my friend decided to move her daughter to another school as she felt she understood what the principal was trying to do and wanted to support her.

### VALUES

This took place many years ago. Were it to happen today no doubt it would be aired on 'Liveline' with Joe Duffy and be commented upon through Facebook and Twitter. Everybody would have an opinion and, I imagine, the principal would be pilloried for daring to suggest what she did.

Whatever about the merits of the case, her actions give an insight into the values that were guiding her thinking. These might be called Gospel values, and in all the controversy surrounding Catholic education these are the very values that might be lost sight of, even though they are the values that should define it.

To understand Gospel values, we need to reflect on the person and ministry of Jesus Christ as presented to us in the four Gospels of the New Testament. This writing is of its time and it bears witness to the experience of the first followers of Jesus (the early Church) responding to his life, death and resurrection. This means that the Gospels were not written as the events happened; rather, they emerged out of the prayer and reflection of the disciples as they sought to come to terms with the content of the Good News preached by Jesus.

#### THE MISSING MIDDLE

The great biblical scholar N.T. Wright has suggested that Christians today often miss out on the true power of the Gospels because of what he calls 'The Missing Middle'.<sup>1</sup> He contends that in the main Churches believers tend to read the Gospels through the lens of the Creeds, in other words, just as the Creeds affirm Jesus' identity as the Son of God, speaking only of his birth and death, so also many believers focus on Jesus' identity without paying sufficient attention to what happens between his birth and his death. Who he was and what he was about can only be grasped by having some understanding of what he said and did during his short public ministry. It is precisely this material that allows us to understand the meaning of his birth and death.

In his public ministry Jesus summed up his message with one simple phrase: he called it the Good News (gospel) of the Kingdom of God (Mk 1:14-15). Much has been written about the meaning of

the term and why Jesus may have chosen it.<sup>2</sup> Behind it lay centuries of Jewish reflection of on the idea of God's rule or God as king. The Psalms and Prophets of the Old Testament offer much material for reflection that can help us to understand the significance of the term for in these sources the idea of God's kingly rule is not restricted to the creation of a political, geographical entity as if it were some kind of territory on earth where God rules. Rather, it demonstrates their conviction that God's rule is an exercise of the loving kindness that characterises the true nature of God. When God reigns then relationships are transformed, oppression ends and peace comes. Hence, in the prophet Isaiah we read:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Jerusalem, 'Your God reigns'. (Is 52:7)

Later in Isaiah we read a definition of this good news of God's reign that was to shape Jesus' awareness of his life's mission:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and release to prisoners. (Is 61:1)

When Jesus chose to explain his mission in these terms (Lk 4:16-21) he was challenging his contemporaries to see themselves and their God differently. By challenging them to 'repent and believe the Good News' he was pointing out to them that much of the suffering that surrounded them was caused by attitudes and behaviours of the ruling classes whether political or religious. Religion functioned as a means of maintaining social control and behind this lay a dreadful distortion of the idea of God that had been preached by the proph-

1. N.T. Wright, *How God Became King*, London: SPCK, 2012, pp 3-24

2. For more on current research on the historical questions around this topic see José Pagola, *Jesus: An Historical Approximation*, Miami: Convivium Press, 2009.

ets. So, when he called for people to welcome the reign of God he was calling them to come to an understanding of the compassion of God that reached out to everyone, especially the most neglected and downtrodden and those despised because of their ethnicity or occupation. Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom was reflected both in his words and in his actions. He consistently reached out to those on the margins. Lepers, the sick and possessed found in him the mercy and loving kindness that the world denied them.

Alongside all the things that he did, and not separate from them, was the activity of Jesus the teacher. 'Teacher' is the title most used of Jesus in the Gospels and his teaching activity is core to his mission of spreading the Kingdom. He wanted his hearers to understand the message and to allow it to transform their lives. His chosen method of teaching the message of God's reign was to tell stories that illustrated its meaning. As a teacher he did not offer a definition of the Kingdom; he simply challenged his hearers to reflect. These are the stories we know as parables and there are some 40 of them in the Gospels.

#### CHALLENGES

By choosing this method to teach, Jesus was striking out in a different direction from the rabbis of his time. He avoided getting into long debates about the interpretation of scriptural texts and instead set about relating to his hearers through stories that were rooted in their life experience and culture. So, the worlds of farming and fishing, slaves and masters, rich and poor, saints and sinners were pictured in short, often dramatic incidents that sometimes left his hearers wondering and other times provoked annoyance or even outrage.

Underlying all of them is an idea of God that challenges the hearer to see self, others and God differently. The grace (or love) of God is at work in ways we do not readily appreciate. We must come to terms with the fact that this love is not earned but freely given. In the reign

of God compassion and humility matter more than external religious observance. Mercy and forgiveness are at the heart of who God is; so, they are not optional for those who would claim to welcome the kingdom. The overwhelming generosity of the God whose reign is revealed by Jesus, shatters ideas of what is reasonable or just and subverts commonly held views about who is 'in' or 'out' when it comes to having favour in God's eyes.

Not surprisingly, this teaching and the activities associated with it were deemed controversial and met with strong opposition. However, all the Gospels witness to Jesus' desire to remain faithful to his mission even though it became increasingly clear that those in power were seeking to destroy him.

#### FAITHFUL TO HIS MISSION AND WITNESS

This brings us, once again, to the phenomenon of the 'Missing Middle'. A focus on the Jesus who 'was born of the Virgin Mary and suffered and died under Pontius Pilate' can leave believers seeing Jesus' death as the reason for his life: He came simply to die and in so doing 'save us from our sins'. Yet when we allow the missing middle to inform our understanding of Jesus we understand that he died because of his faithfulness to his mission of witnessing to the Reign of God. His resurrection demonstrates that God's reign triumphs over the existing distorted world view dominated by sin, darkness and death.

Grasping this is crucial for understanding what it means to be a follower of Jesus. In his life he gathered disciples so that they might share in his mission and he empowered them to do the things he was doing (Lk 10:1-9). The word 'disciple' means learner and, as his followers, we learn from him so that we can embrace the Good News of the Kingdom living as he lived and giving witness to the Father's love. In the Gospel of John this understanding of discipleship, and consequently of Church, is stated dramatically:

Jesus said to them again 'Peace be with you. As the father has

sent me so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' (Jn 20: 21-22)

In a real sense this defines the work of the Church as a community of believers. It is nothing less than a Spirit-filled participation in the mission of Jesus; we too are sent by the Father.

Given this background to Jesus and his ministry, when it comes to the world of education we would do well to remember:

For the Church Catholic schools are not an end in themselves.

They are a means of fulfilling the basic mission of the Church to announce the Good News of the Kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, a Catholic school does not exist simply to meet the religious or spiritual needs of its Catholic students. The Church recognises its role in education as a way of serving the common good and the education it offers reflects this:

The person of each individual human being, in his or her material and spiritual needs, is at the heart of Christ's teaching: that is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school.<sup>4</sup>

#### BECOMING A LIVED PARABLE

So, when it comes to talking about the Catholic ethos of school it must be clear that we cannot content ourselves with a prominent display of the appropriate iconography or rigid adherence to the liturgical calendar. Such manifestations of school identity are useful only if they serve a greater need, namely that we are guided in our actions and behaviour by Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God. When we read the parables, we are challenged to consider the ways

in which our response to situations that arise in school may exclude and oppress others.

More than that, we are challenged as disciples to go the extra mile, to concern ourselves with those on the margins and to reflect honestly on what motivates our actions. This is how the lived reality of the Catholic school may become a parable of the Kingdom as we seek to have our relationships, policies and plans informed and empowered by the Spirit of Christ.

#### CHALLENGING OUR WORLDVIEW

This brings us back to the opening story, a modern parable. It could quite rightly be argued that it is an extreme example and that it could not form the basis for a policy written into the school code of behaviour. However, the stories Jesus told were not intended to be turned into rules and regulations; they were invitations to look again at our attitudes because it is these that form our behaviour.

In Matthew 20:1-16 Jesus tells a story in which he says that the Kingdom of God is like a landowner who decides that the labourers who worked for only one hour in the vineyard should be paid the same as those who worked all day. The aim of the parable is not to propose an unjust pay policy for agricultural labourers. Rather, Jesus wants to challenge a worldview in which we insist that people should get only what they deserve. God does not treat us this way; neither should we determine our response to others in this way.

This pattern of challenging our worldview is repeated again and again in parables such as the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-31), The Weeds Among the Wheat (13:24-30), The Unforgiving Servant (Mt 18:23-35), The Talents (Mt 25:14-30) and the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46). There is more than a little element of subversion in each of these stories and they only make sense in the light of Jesus' overall project of teaching the ways of the Kingdom of God.

3. David Toboy, S.J., *Denominational Education and Politics: Ireland in a European Context*. Dublin, Veritas 2013, p.339.

4. *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, 1998

## CREATING A CONTEXT FOR DISCUSSION

If we go along with the definition of ethos as 'the way we do things around here', then we can question how Catholic our ethos is by considering to what extent the way we do things around here arises from Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God and whether or not our school is striving on a daily basis to become a parable of that Kingdom.

This is a challenging task, for two reasons. Firstly, principals, staff and boards of management are under enormous pressure to meet all the compliance demands of the Department of Education and Skills and the Inspectorate; and so finding time to reflect on the Gospels might seem like a luxury. Secondly, the secular context in which we work means that many of our teachers, parents and board members may have very little awareness of what is being discussed in this article.

So, we are left with another task, that of creating a context in which we can have a conversation about Catholic ethos in which people can come to a renewed understanding of the Gospel vision which sustains a Catholic approach to education. But let us not be overwhelmed, rather let us take heart for the Kingdom of God is like a seed that someone sows and it grows we know not how! (see Mark 4:26-29).

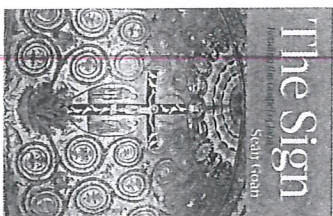
## GROWTH

As educators we readily understand the metaphor of sowing seeds and Jesus used it frequently to paint Kingdom pictures. Many of our schools have gardens and through them children of all ages learn not just biology and the science of growth. They also experience wonder at what happens when the ground is well prepared, and the young shoots are cared for.

As a parable of the Kingdom the school becomes a garden in which all kinds of growth are possible and the starting premise is that we are sharing in something greater than ourselves. 'It grows

we know not how'. The Kingdom is gift first and then a challenge. This understanding guided Jesus in all that he said and did. As educators in faith schools this must be what distinguishes our approach. It would be foolish and arrogant to imagine that ours are the only or indeed the most caring schools in the system.

However, for our own sake and the sake of the children entrusted to us we need to be aware of the source of our vision because from that source we derive nourishment, energy, courage and hope for our unique approach to ethos which is to celebrate the daily mystery of the school as a Parable of the Kingdom.



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SEÁN COAN

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