

Dear Friends,

'Pass It On'

The issue of parents passing on their faith (or lack of it) to their children, is a thorny one for many. In a recent poll commissioned by the Christian think-tank *Theos*, only 31% of parents said that they wanted their children “to hold the same beliefs about whether or not there is a God or Higher Power ... when they [were] older”, and only 28% of those who attended church said that they were not bothered either way.

One reason for this apparent indifference is that parents are fearful about the hostile secular climate in which their children are growing up. It seems from this survey that they worry about their offspring ‘standing out’ as different. People like to ‘fit in’ and will go to great lengths to hide their real views and comply with what they think are the social norms. The surprise results of the recent Brexit referendum and US Presidential election, where many only felt able to voice their opinion in the secrecy of the ballot box, show very clearly how this can happen.

Anxieties about secular culture are further reinforced by an over-easy acceptance of the widespread belief that adults should respect the autonomy of children and give them a purely rationalistic, ‘neutral’ upbringing. Complete neutrality is neither possible nor desirable. Parents cannot and should not remain silent about what truly concerns them (their child’s need to complete their homework, for example, to brush their teeth, to visit their grandparents, or to write a thank you letter). They are right to intervene in such matters; children cannot be left in a spiritual or moral vacuum. When they leave their offspring to ‘decide for themselves’, what they are effectively doing is to convey their unstated belief that the issue in question is not of any real importance.

Parents in the survey worry that their knowledge of their faith is limited and that they will not be able adequately to answer the faith-related questions which their children put to them. They also have a strong sense of powerlessness. Faced with the huge cultural influences and pressures to which their children are exposed, they wonder whether it is futile trying to pass on their faith and not even worth attempting.

Judging from the work of social scientists over the last few decades, however, who are quoted in the report, *‘Passing on Faith’**, parents remain the most important influence on what a young person believes in adult life. If the latter has been able to enjoy a home with stable, warm and loving relationships, and to see his or her parents express a faith which is strong and open, and practiced and nurtured with commitment and integrity, they have a good chance of remaining active members of the church and retaining a strong faith.

Passing on core Christian beliefs and values is not always be easy, and there are plenty of potential pitfalls. But if these beliefs and values are of fundamental importance to us in shaping our lives, it is both natural and right that we should try to do so. For as St Paul rightly asks:

“How can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one they have not heard?” (Romans 10:14)

HB

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