**Gospel Values and the Catholic School**

When we speak of gospel values[[1]](#endnote-1) we are focusing on values that are embodied in the person and message of Jesus Christ. So what are those values and what do they bring to the work of education? We may be hampered in our quest here because we have perhaps subconsciously come to believe that ‘gospel values’ is a generic expression that sums up a vague desire that we should be nice to each other and treat people with respect. The problem with this is that it misses the point that in Jesus’ time his values were sometimes deemed to be subversive. They undermined the value system of his religious and political world and so were rejected by many. The aim of this article is help us rediscover that behind the idea of gospel values lies a dynamic vision of what it is to be human and to encourage us to reflect on what this might mean for our schools in the Le Chéile Trust

**Gospel Values and the Kingdom of God**If we consider that a major part of Jesus’ relatively short public life was given over to teaching then a good place to start would be to reflect on what he taught and how. The content of his first lesson was short and somewhat enigmatic: “The Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the Good News”. From the outset the Good News is linked to Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom. Most Christians are familiar with the Kingdom idea through praying the Our Father and asking that God’s Kingdom come. When questioned about what that might mean or what they are praying for many people relate it to the idea of heaven and the hope of eternal life. However this is a very restricted view and fails to take into account the many and varied ways in which Jesus spoke about it. The clue to its meaning lies in the second half of the petition in the prayer Jesus taught: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The Kingdom is, put simply, a metaphor for God’s will; in other words what want God wants for us and for the world, it is about how people should engage with the experience of human living. Jesus, as a revealer of God’s will embodies and demonstrates the mind of God when it comes to how human beings should engage with the experience of human living!

**Gospel Values and the Parables of Jesus**Jesus never offered a definition of the kingdom but rather opted to demonstrate what it meant by the stories he told and the work that he did. His teaching is offered through parables and these have been usefully defined as short stories with a double meaning. The parables of Jesus reflected his world; the village life of farmers, shepherds and fishermen. They featured families divided and kings throwing banquets, people struggling with debt while others rejoice because they find a treasure beyond price, or a coin they thought they had lost, unbelievable harvests and great catches of fish along with doubts about the fruitfulness of the land. In terms of content they are not particularly religious, they don’t feature holy men and women saying their prayers or giving sermons. Using the here and now these stories highlight attitudes and behavior that reveal the presence or indeed absence of God and his way of responding to the world of human experience. In short they highlight the values of the Kingdom, which we also call gospel values.

Two of the better known parables, the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son illustrate this point very well. However they suffer a little from being too well known to the extent that the strong message of each of these stories is sometimes diluted when they are read out of context and merely taken as moral instruction.

The Good Samaritan is often thought to be a story that teaches us to be good to people in need. However when read in its context in the Gospel of Luke (10:25-37) it becomes clear that it is much more about challenging a mindset that seeks to set limits on who is worthy or deserving of our compassion. By choosing to make a Samaritan the hero Jesus has already laid down a marker and irritated the lawyer who asked the question “who is my neighbor”. On religious and political grounds the lawyer would hold Samaritans in contempt and yet the punch line of the story is: go and behave like the Samaritan – be willing to learn from someone you despise that your world view is too small and that your mind is closed. It is easy to see how being good to people in need is a gospel value, however the story is equally and perhaps even more about recognising your prejudices and leaving them behind: that too is a gospel value.

The story of the Prodigal Son is probably the best known parable of them all and is usually thought to be a story to help people understand that God will always forgive them. So we know from this and other examples of the teaching of Jesus that forgiveness is a gospel value. However the context in which the story is told and the punch line that completes it serve as a reminder that this parable is also about challenging a mindset. The context for the parables in Luke 15 is given at the beginning of the chapter. “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him and the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them. So he told *them* this parable” (Lk 15:1-3).

 The story of the prodigal son is preceded by two parables that focus on the attitude of God towards the sinner. The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin present God as the irresponsible shepherd who is willing to risk everything to go after the one lost sheep or as the woman who will not stop searching until she finds the lost coin. In both cases there is unbounded joy at the outcome when what was lost is found. That format is followed in the story of the two sons. The focus this time is not only the attitude of God as the father in the story but also and perhaps more significantly from the listener’s point of view, the attitude of the older brother.
He is outraged and appalled at the extent of the father’s indulgence of the brat who showed a complete disregard for everything they hold dear as a family. By any human reckoning the older brother deserves our sympathy – the father’s response to the younger son is unreasonable and even hurtful. So in this story there are two outcomes. We see the unbounded joy of the father who wants to throw a party and the righteous indignation of the dutiful brother who wants to have nothing to do with this farce. What gospel value is being promoted here? In theory everybody likes the idea of forgiveness but in practice we make up our minds about who is deserving and who is not. So we are invited to recognise the extent to which we are like the Pharisees and scribes who complain that Jesus welcomes the wrong kind of people and to open ourselves to the God calls to a more radical understanding of love.

Both these parables highlight the problem we have in coming to terms with a God whose gracious generosity is never earned but is always given. The same message is present in the parable of the vineyard workers in Matthew 20:1-16. Taken at face value this story seems to suggest that an employer can do whatever he likes and ignore the demands of basic justice when it comes to paying his workers. Once again the context of the proclamation of the kingdom offers the clue to its real meaning which focuses on God’s desire to draw all people to himself without distinction. Clearly this deliberately provocative story turns human reasoning on its head as Jesus explains to his hearers that their idea of God is little more than a projection of their restricted world view that rests solely on the idea of merit and one which fails completely to understand that the Father of Jesus whose “kingdom” he proclaims can only be understood in terms of unconditional love and compassion.

**Gospel Values and the Actions of Jesus**If the stories Jesus told give us an insight into this Kingdom he proclaims then so do his actions. The decision to sit at table with those designated as “tax collectors and sinners” caused offence because by this action he welcomes those who are excluded and in the process puts himself on the outside (Mark 2:13-17). His action is calculated to demonstrate something about the nature of the God whom Jesus serves, the one who actively seeks out the lost and this is also true of his healing ministry. The miracles are sometimes thought of as proof that Jesus was who he said he was – the son of God. Such a reading fails to take into account how his actions are connected to his preaching of God’s Kingdom. They are not performed in order to show power or to win over followers but rather they are indicators of the kind of healing God wants to bring to a broken humanity. Healing a leper (Mark 1:40-45), a woman suffering a hemorrhage (Mark 5:24-34), or another woman crippled for eighteen years (Lk 14:10-17) were actions that had consequences. Those healed now find themselves able to take their place in their communities from which to a greater or lesser extent they had been excluded because of their condition. However this healing ministry also offended others whose idea of God had much more to do with the exercise of power and keeping social and religious outcasts in their place. The evidence for this is to be seen in the story of the crippled woman in the synagogue who is healed on the Sabbath In this instance the healing takes place in a context that highlights how the practice of religion may work as an oppressive force. As a woman this person is already disadvantaged in the synagogue liturgy. Women could attend but were in a separate gallery at the back. As a women suffering from an illness she was doubly marginalized. Her ailment was considered as a punishment for sin. Jesus’ response to her challenges the religious perspective of the leader of the assembly whose mindset is revealed when he protests at what is taking place. This dynamic of challenging a certain type of religiosity is also at work in the story of the man with the withered hand (Mk 3:1-6). The extent to which this is deemed to be subversive behavior is evident in the fact that the story ends with the religious and political leaders joining forces to destroy Jesus. The values of the Kingdom present in Jesus’ ministry in these stories are those of compassion and justice and they rest entirely on awareness that the God whom Jesus reveals is concerned with the wellbeing (salvation!) of every human being. Just as the parables challenge our mindsets so does the healing work of Jesus.

**Gospel Values and the Christian Community**The focus so far has been on the words and deeds of Jesus as the basis for an understanding of gospel values. However, as mentioned at the outset, the early church proclaimed the person of Jesus, the crucified and risen Christ, as well as his message. Their new found faith was not primarily about a new ethic but about a relationship with a person. Baptism was viewed as an entry into his life and a new relationship with God made possible through the gift of the Holy Spirit. This new life had consequences for believers as they witnessed to it by their lives which were to be in conformity with that of Jesus. The letters of Paul are the earliest documents of the church and in them Paul typically begins by addressing the particular problems of the community he is writing to and then moves on to exhort them to a behave in ways that are consistent with their beliefs about Jesus. A very good illustration of what this means can be seen in the final section of the letter to the Romans where Paul exhorts a community that has experienced tension between the Jewish and Gentile sections of that community to live out the consequences of their new found faith.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;

love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Romans 12:9-18)

He is not offering them a rule book and he never uses the phrase “gospel values” however here and elsewhere in his letters he makes it clear that being a Christian is not so much about creating a list of things to do as developing attitudes and behavior that ought to characterize the life of the community. The values they live by flow from their understanding of Christ and their relationship with him. There are other key passages from Paul that illustrate the point as he exhorts communities not just to keep a set of commandments but to embrace a worldview, a mindset in which human living is seen as a grateful response to the compassionate God who is made known to them through the Goods News of the Kingdom (1Cor 13:1-13, Gal 5:22-26, Eph 4:1-6, Phil 4:4-9).
**Gospel Values and the Le Chéile School**Even this brief overview of our founding story from the New Testament makes it clear that ‘gospel values’ transcend mere good manners. They are rooted in the infinite worth of each person as a child of God. They call us to model our attitudes and behavior on the words and deeds of Jesus and this has enormous implications for how we approach the task of Catholic education. This is very well summarized in the words of John Paul II:

"The person of each individual human being, in his or her material and spiritual needs, is at the heart of Christ's teaching: this is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Such an understanding will impact on all areas of school life from the classroom, to the staff room to the principal’s office and the meetings of the Board of Management. It will impact on all these places because it highlights that gospel values influence all the relationships and activities of the school community. The benefits for a school of self-evaluation are being promoted now by the inspectorate in the Department of Education and Skills but it is well known that this is not a new idea and indeed many schools have, through their school planning initiatives, been encouraging a culture of self-reflection with a view to ensuring that the school runs as well as it can at all levels. Given that in our current context many people question the value and relevance of faith based schools it is clear that Catholic Schools have a particular need to engage with processes that will leave them open to the transformative possibilities offered by striving to be faithful to gospel values. It is faithfulness to these values lived out in specific ways at particular times that gave the religious founders of the congregations in the Le Chéile Trust their special charism. Their congregations, working from those same values, continued this endeavour and gave the schools their special identity or “characteristic spirit.” This spirit is not reducible to a framed mission statement or the occasional whole school liturgy, Rather it derives from and gains strength through the gospel values that help to drive the vision and give the hope for what the school can become because they do not just represent a challenge they are also a gift – the Spirit of God empowers us to live them. How this is so in practice is something for the school community to pray about, reflect upon, plan for, implement and evaluate on an ongoing basis so that each school may be true to its Catholic heritage in a dynamic way that responds to the challenges of contemporary society.

The “Gospel Values” page now found in the Le Chéile Charter is offered as a framework for exploring what this article is about and presents an overview of how gospel values might impact on life in the school. It is not an exhaustive list by any means and more could and indeed should be added. However it might provide a springboard for staffs, boards of management, student councils and parents’ associations to reflect on ways in which the whole school community might be guided and inspired by the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. Our identity and ethos as catholic schools in the Le Chéile Trust derives from the Good News he proclaimed by his words and deeds, by his life death and resurrection. It is this Good News that gives energy to what we do and how we do it.

1. The word gospel has its roots in old English and is rendered in modern English by the term Good News. This in turn is a direct translation of a Greek word (euangelion) used by the early Christian writers of the New Testament to speak of two closely related concepts. One was the message of Jesus which he announced during his ministry and the second was message about Jesus proclaimed by the Church after the resurrection. So for example in the Gospel of Mark Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming the “Good News (gospel) of God” and saying: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the Good News (gospel)” (Mark 1:15). On the other hand in the writings of Paul we read how he sees himself as a servant of the Good News (gospel) according to the grace of God (Ephesians 3:7). Here and indeed throughout his letters Paul is speaking of the message about Jesus being proclaimed by the early Church. This usage explains how the term was soon coined for the four different stories of Jesus’ life that emerged in the late first century, attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In the earliest documents these are called “the Gospel according to …” In English we capitalize the word in this case because it is referring to a specific document rather than the broad message of Jesus’ teaching or the Church’s proclamation of him. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. (John Paul II, *Address to the I National Meeting of the Catholic School in Italy*, in "L'Osservatore Romano", 24

November 1991, p. 4.) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)