

THE TEACHER'S TALE

Paul Freedland

Paul and his wife Chris were among the `early settlers`. Both active Christians, their decision to come to Milton Keynes was based on the belief that God was leading them. In those days the Promised Land was just that: a lot of land and a lot of promises for a city of the future. Paul recognises, however, that his `way` isn't necessarily the way society is heading. We each have our own way to tread – and we must find it for ourselves. It isn't something which can be taught in school.

We're both Londoners, born and bred in North London. I was in my probationary year teaching not far from where we lived. One of the leading lights in the Parent Teachers Association was doing some work in Milton Keynes, his company was building some houses. He got to talking to me about it. I'd heard of Milton Keynes but I hadn't thought anything about it. This was eleven years ago, the place hardly existed then, Anyway, we started to think about it and as Christians praying about it and we decided to move. On the face of it, it was a good time, the kids were young and the prospect of getting decent housing in London was virtually non-existent. So I suppose housing had a lot to do with it. I didn't have a job lined up but I always had a fairly strong belief in my abilities as a teacher, so I felt that wouldn't be a problem, particularly in an expanding situation. Dedicated teachers in the primary sector tend to get on fairly fast anyway.

I contacted the Education Office here and said that I was interested in working in Milton Keynes. There weren't any jobs at the time but they said they'd let me know. I kept phoning them and in the end – largely to get rid of me, I think – they sent me to see Kit Welchman who at that time was running Simpson Village School. He was recruiting staff for a new school at Simpson and I said that I'd be very interested. I spent a day there and fell in love with the school and with him as a person, really. He's always been a kind of mentor for me. I was offered the job as a scale one teacher when I'd finished my probationary year.

There was no house available so I stayed with friends during the week and went home to London weekends. After a whole term and a considerable amount of hassle we got a house and moved into Tinkers Bridge. We were the first ever people to live there. Shortly after that we had a severe gale which blew down some of the houses which were under construction, and so for the next four months there was only us and about four or five other families living on the estate. But we had our own community worker and our own Community House and an arrivals worker and everything – but no one else, because they were worried about the strength of the houses. There was a lot of hysteria at the time. It didn't really bother us – we were very much in the process of loving all the freedom.

In London we'd lived on the first floor of a house, in a non-self-contained flat, with an old lady upstairs, and we had three children under the age of five.. Every time Chris wanted to go out she had to bump the pram down the stairs and then get the

kids to the park because there was nowhere else for them to play. Just having your own front door was fantastic.

It's difficult to imagine now because Milton Keynes is such a civilised place, but in those early days it was so primitive. Shopping was Bletchley, and not even Sainsbury's existed then, you had to go to Northampton or Bedford. During that time it was very much like being a pioneer. Netherfield wasn't built, and apart from Tinker's Bridge there was nothing else in the south of the city at all. The only estates that were built at the time were Fullers Slade and Galley Hill in the North, which were miles away. The city centre was still being farmed.

I stayed at Simpson for five years, until I moved to Springfield School – where I became deputy head and eventually headmaster. I believe that schools should be eventually human institutions, and that the accent should be on `human`, rather than `institution`. It's inevitable that the state school is going to be a bit institutional – your customers are there because they have to be, not necessarily because they want to, and on the whole they are only at a particular school by the accident of where they happen to live.

I believe that a good education doesn't parcel people up into little packages of `social`, `personal` and `academic`, but takes the person as a whole and tries to develop that person as a whole human being. Social education, in terms of helping kids to understand where their place is in society, is as important as anything, they might learn from a textbook or from the blackboard. A school is, in fact, a community in microcosm and one of the most important things we can help children come to terms with is how they relate to different people – their class teacher, their peer group, people they perceive to be enemies, dinner ladies, school secretaries, welfare assistants, visitors, people we meet when we go to school trips. All that is about learning to deal with life. I've never believed that school is a preparation for life, school is life. The kids are people and they are members of the community *now*. If you are going to set up an institution that has a human face, then the notion of enjoyment is an important one. So we try to make our curriculum lively and adventurous, we try to take the kids out a lot, we bring in visiting speakers, so it's not the same old boring stuff from books, the same teacher teaching the same things, and so on. The relationship between the class teacher and his or her pupils should be more akin to that of a friend than somebody who is held in fear and awe. The fun side is very important.

The whole of our school code of conduct is based on the idea that we want everybody within the school to behave for the benefit of the whole, and that the benefit of the individual is secondary to that. But that is a message that is doomed to failure because there is so much pressure outside of school – from the home, from the television, from society as a whole – which generates the notion that the most important person in life is oneself and after that you might care to think about other people. The more you can acquire and the better you can do for yourself the better everything will be. That is not something which I feel is satisfactory philosophy for life.

I`m A Workaholic

I enjoy working to the point where I probably drive people to distraction. If Chris was here she`d tell you that it took her a number of years to convince me that holidays were a good idea at all. I`m a workaholic, really. I don`t enjoy sitting down and doing nothing. I don`t like watching telly all that much, although if I`m tired I might watch something mindless on the box. I`m devoted to my job. I love it, so to work is to play, really.

Christ is very much the centre of our lives and the church is an important part of it. We`re members of Coffee Hall Community Church. For the last two or three years I`ve been an elder or leader. Most of the time I`ve run the Sunday School, although for the last year or so Chris has been doing that. I lead services and do a bit of visiting and the things that leaders in churches do.

I would hope that my Christian belief and commitment goes with me into school and my attitude to headship is one of servanthood, a sort of servant/leader figure, not an autocrat. I would expect to do my share of the grotty jobs, washing up, sweeping and clearing up and all the nitty-gritty things that have to be done because I think it`s important that leaders do that. Christ himself sets us that example. Hopefully my attitude towards parents, to kids and to my colleagues is all coloured by my Christian conviction. But when it come to the teaching of religion, then I don`t believe that I have any mandate whatsoever to use my position to evangelise. So my assemblies are absolutely non-religious. We never pray and very rarely sing anything that could be called a religious song. I don`t think it`s right that state schools should be in the business of prosletising or propagandizing for a particular religious point of view. I think it`s right that children should be taught *about* religion, but true religion, in my opinion, is a personal experience and you can`t teach that. You can only preach that and encourage people to join you in it, and that is not the role of a school teacher. I think that one reason why the church has such a bad reputation nowadays is the R.E. that kids learn in school. I think it would be a positive thing for the church if it were banished from the school curriculum.

I don`t see myself being head teacher of a primary school for the rest of my working life. From the professional point of view, I honestly have no idea what I`m likely to do next. It will depend on where we feel God is leading us.