

YOUNG PEOPLE AND CHURCH

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“The young people of today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age. They are impatient of all restraint. They talk as if they know everything, and what passes for wisdom with us is foolishness to them”. So said Peter, a monk in 1274!

Yes, of course young people think they know best – but heaven help us if you people do not have convictions. And it’s just not true that young people today think nothing of but themselves – older people can be far more parochial and far more selfish than younger people. Those of us who are getting on in years – and in my book that is anybody over 40 – better beware of making judgments on young people. The fact is that the worst danger that confronts the younger generation is the example set by older people.

I am delighted that this evening six of my young people will be baptised, and in so doing they will be publicly committing themselves to going the way of Jesus. Yes, these six teenagers will be declaring their resolve not to pursue their own interests, but rather to live for Jesus, and for him own. As one of them said to me, ‘If Jesus Christ gave his life for me, then I can do nothing else in response save give my life for him’. Wow - would that every older Christian shared the enthusiasm and the passion of these young people for Jesus!

Of the six young people I am baptising tonight, four come from Christian homes. I find it always heartening when young people brought up in the church come to a personal faith in Jesus for themselves. Sadly, too many children from Christian homes are put off the Christian faith by older people in the church – older people whose love for God and indeed love for one another has become cold – older people who whose faith and indeed whose faith practices have become fossilised. Goodness, I seem to be having a go at older people – but sometimes we need to call a spade a spade.

Two of the young people I am baptizing tonight do not come from Christian homes. They never went to Sunday School – indeed, it has only been in the last year or so that they have any contact with a church. To baptise such young people gives me even more pleasure. For the church doesn’t exist for its own people – but rather for the people outside the church. I am amazed that these two young people have become Christians. For let’s face it, the way most of us do church today is light years away from the experience of young people outside the church.

One of the challenges I face as a minister is to rather ensure that the way we do church does not become a stumbling block for young people. Take for instance the singing of hymns. I love singing the great hymns of the church – but then I imbibed hymns with my mother’s milk. I love the organ too – I love a Bach prelude or a Saint-Sains postlude. But hymn-singing and organ-playing are an alien world to young people today. To expect young people to worship God in the way we like to worship God is a nonsense – and it is to create an unnecessary barrier to Christian faith. So let’s do away with these barriers – after all, it is not as if hymns

and organs are of the essence of faith. And what is true of hymns and organs, should be true of a host of other practices which have developed in our churches, which have become dear to us, but are not of the essence of faith. The reality is that if we older people, that is to say people over 40, want to see younger people commit themselves to Jesus and his church, then we (and not they) have to change. Indeed, we have no choice if the church is to have any future: for young people are the church's future – in fact they should be the church's present.