

## Sparing the Rod, Spoiling the Society

*The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother.*  
(Proverbs 29 v 15) *No discipline seems pleasant at the time. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.* (Heb. 12 v 11)

This may seem a rather unusual topic for a pastoral reflection – perhaps more political than pastoral. However I think it is true to say that a great many people these days are negatively affected by the lack of discipline they experience every day in our society and may well feel increasingly despondent with the way things are going. This is written to offer some encouragement as you hopefully discover, in talking to others, just how many people share the same concerns and would claim the same moral high ground if the opportunity offered itself. There is, then, a collective pastoral question to be asked: how can we influence change for the better?

The word *discipline* comes from the Latin for a pupil, someone who is learning, and means “training that is expected to produce a particular character” and “the controlled behaviour resulting from such training”. So many of the ills that currently beset our society are the result of the marginalising of discipline. We are now “reaping the whirlwind”<sup>1</sup> of the liberal do-gooders of the 1970s and 80s.

Too many children these days never hear the word “no” or, if they do, nothing ever happens if they ignore it. How often do we hear a parent say to their child, “If you don’t stop that...” followed by some veiled threat which never happens even though the behaviour continues and so the child learns that they can get away with doing whatever they want. A crucial part of a child’s social development – learning about right and wrong and how to distinguish between them - is therefore missed, just as surely as if they had never been taught the alphabet, or how to fasten their shoes, or how to cross the street safely. Those of us who, as children, *were* taught the difference between right and wrong, who were taught to do as we were told and knew what the consequences would be for not doing so, may well struggle to understand how anyone could not have learned such basic lessons. But, if no one is teaching, how can lessons be learned? If such knowledge is never imparted then there will always be a deficit and children who have never been made to understand and accept the word ‘no’ grow up to be adults who ignore it also. And if they have never learned to do as they were told they become adults who do as they please. As we see every day, the lesson continues not to be taught.

Some years ago the artiste Billie (more recently of “Dr Who” fame) had a hit with a song that was very much a teen anthem. Named after its recurring lyric, it asked a series of questions about why young people do what they do, and the constant

---

<sup>1</sup> “They sow the wind, they will reap the whirlwind” (Hosea 8 v 7)

answer was: “Because we want to! Because we want to!” That, for me, says it all. Kids are doing whatever they want to *because* they want to and because no one has ever said “no” and enforced it. This is why they (albeit a troublesome minority) ride their bikes on pavements; scatter litter like confetti; are verbally and physically threatening and abusive in the street; why they disregard prohibition and trespassing signs; why they carry out acts of wanton vandalism and destruction; and why, if they haven’t got something they will simply steal them from those who do. And none of this matters to them because there are no negative consequences – nothing ever happens or at least nothing that bothers them enough to deter them in the first place.

**T**his attitude then goes with them into adulthood and so we have grown-ups (not always the best description) (and, again, a minority but a very visible one) ignoring speed limits; parking wherever they want; using mobile phones while driving; driving without tax or insurance<sup>2</sup>; disregarding no smoking legislation; using foul and abusive language in public; littering at will and fly-tipping and so on, and so on, and so on. And, as another example of the “because I want to” attitude, there’s the “neighbours from hell” syndrome: the almost unbelievably self-centred behaviour that shows itself in a total and complete lack of respect, regard or consideration for others. And all of this is because they don’t care and it doesn’t matter (to them) - there is no enforcement of the law and no punishment for disregarding it. It’s all about “me” and what “I” want.

**A**rrogance is a basic factor in the disregard so many show for the law or for inconvenient aspects of it and their readiness to question and challenge anyone and everyone in positions of authority. By definition, arrogance has to do with “self” being at the centre of things. It is a childhood perception that the world revolves around “me” and so if developmental lessons have not been learned as children, the centrality of “self” continues unchallenged into adulthood. And because discipline was never learned, then there is no chance of any *self*-discipline being exercised and that becomes another contributing factor.

**I**f someone has little or no regard for the law or the penalties that can result from breaking it, then there is even less chance they’ll have any personal discipline. In other words if they don’t care whether they break the law for which society may hold them to account, they are certainly not going to bother about an internal rule of life for which they are only accountable to themselves. Choosing to live by a code of personal principles necessarily takes *self*-discipline precisely because no one else is going to hold you to account (except God, one day, of course) and unless someone has internalised the moral values that underlie those principles, then their response is always going to be: ‘So what? Who cares?’

---

<sup>2</sup> (you will notice that many of these examples are connected with driving)

**I** would cite as an example of what I'm saying an issue close to home. The entrance to our Parish Centre is regularly blocked by the vans and cars of drivers who choose to ignore the very clearly posted "No Parking" signs – even the "Fire Exit, Keep Clear" signs – simply because they will park wherever it's convenient for them regardless. The fact that they are blocking access (including disabled access) to a public facility – even that they are blocking a fire exit – is of no consequence to them. Most days there will usually also be at least one or two cars parked on the double yellow lines at the end of the road – just as we see all over town. The drivers know there is very little risk in ignoring the law because no one is enforcing it but, more basic than that, there is a self-centred arrogance that they will do whatever they want to *because* they want to and because they can. All they are bothered about is "Me, myself and I" and it all goes back to their childhood when no one said 'no' and no one taught the lesson – then or since.

The frequency with which we experience such behaviour is a rather alarming indicator of how widely distributed the problem appears to be. The fact that as a society we have failed to counter such a development gradually begins to legitimise it and, as it becomes increasingly the norm, it is the previously desirable values and standards that become deviant. Those of us who respect and keep to the law become the fools.

**O**ne of the additional ills in our society is lack of respect - respect for other people and especially, as we've been saying, respect for the law and for authority. It shows itself in the behaviour and attitude of those individuals who seem to think that the world revolves around them and, as a result, they have little or no regard or consideration for other people because they are only interested in "self". The former Chief Constable of West Yorkshire, Keith Hellawell, has said: "Simple courtesies are being ignored. Young people will rarely offer their seat to an older person on the bus or train. Motorists fight over precedence on the road or for a place in a car park. Disabled parking bays are taken by the able-bodied. More worrying still is behaviour which totally disregards the peace, comfort, morality and tranquillity of others. People have to put up with excessive noise in the home at all hours, and filth and rubbish in the garden, obscene, boorish and lewd behaviour in public places. Vile, offensive language is now commonplace in the classroom, the home and on the streets, as well as on television and radio. Parents openly shout obscenities at unruly children in public places. And woe betide anyone who intervenes as they will be subject to the same abuse."

**E**verything we have said indicates just how far things have gone and that it has been down the wrong road. Keith Hellawell again: "Society as we know it is collapsing about us, and no one appears to be doing anything about it. There are still many families who bring up their children to respect others in the way they

would wish to be respected themselves. However they are in danger of being outnumbered by those who care for little but themselves.” We cannot be like the other people around us.<sup>3</sup> As followers of Christ we are called to be better and to do better, and to heal our broken world. Our parish community, our faith family, should be the one place above all where we find the resources – spiritual, pastoral and sacramental - and the support and encouragement to set about that task. And one obvious starting point is to ensure that we are not perpetuating the situation either in ourselves or in our children.

\* \* \*

Fr Neil McNicholas

---

<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 8 v 1-9