

THE ISAAC ARMITAGE LECTURE

Friday 26 August, 2016
Shore Church of England Grammar School

Response to Armitage Lecture given by Rev Dr David Sandifer
“Cultivating innocence: Character formation in the age of porn”

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Dr Wright, Rev Dr David Sandifer and all of us who care about young people good evening. I want to thank Dr Wright and Shore Chaplain, Paul Dudley, for the opportunity to respond. I am grateful to Dr Sandifer for his timely paper on Pornography. In fact, when I saw the title of the Lecture this year I registered to attend straight away.

How appropriate that this lecture should take place amidst the aftermath of last week’s on line article¹ about the website used to see and share nude photos of young women which named 70 schools around Australia, including mine: where once named it was assumed that the girls at my school were sending photos of themselves and the boys were asking for them and posting them. This was accompanied by the predictable deluge of parental emails asking me what I was going to do about it... more of that later.

Dr Sandifer’s Paper brings into sharp focus where we are standing as a society now. He quite rightly seeks to move us from passivity to action by raising the alarm on the current situation. Pornography is changing the nature of relationships and having a profound impact on attitudes between the genders. But he equally raised the problem of appearing to be alarmist. No-one likes to be seen as alarmist or to seem to be over-reacting and so we say nothing.

Perhaps a reading of the words of Professor Catharine Lumby from Macquarie University which were quoted in the Australian Guardian online give us a hint of why we stay silent: “the way people approach [the sending of nude photos] is moralistic, authoritarian and paternalistic”. She adds, “conservative attitudes about gender are the real problem here, and a lot of experts and educators have conservative ideology and religious agendas”².

I doubt if any of us wants to be labelled moralistic or paternalistic let alone authoritarian, and so the call is to just accept that this is how young people relate now.

¹ <http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/real-life/news-life/students-from-70-australian-schools-targeted-by-sick-pornography-ring/news-story/53288536e0ce3bba7955e92c7f7fa8da>

² https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/aug/24/experts-criticise-paternalistic-response-to-schoolgirls-sharing-explicit-images?CMP=soc_568

Dr Sandifer's Paper does something to challenge this by giving us an historical perspective. The perspective helps us to see how attitudes are shaped and changed and how what is acceptable becomes the "wallpaper" against which we live. However, seeing how these attitudes can equally be changed by voices that speak up and to see the impact of evangelical voices in the past is helpful. Although, I wonder if the perfect storm of a loss of belief, technology and individualism will make it hard for the prophetic voices of this age to be heard let alone heeded.

Dr Sandifer's Paper acknowledges that pornography has always existed and it reminds us that in every age humankind has taken the good gifts God gives us and marred them. His suggestions for how we might challenge the status quo and be the change we want to see by taking on board the lessons of the past are useful in sharpening our focus on what we could be doing. I was particularly struck by the dual ideas of the loss of the ethic of innocence and the loss of the sense of negative knowledge. Perhaps it is this which is at the heart of the issue.

Our students live in a world where nothing is hidden. Young people have always been curious about sex but now they have the internet at their fingertips and can find out what they want to know and this means for many they will get their sex education from pornography. As Dr Sandifer has shown, this is already having and will have (if unabated) a profound impact on how relationships are viewed. It is this that has made me ask these questions; "I wonder why we no longer think it right to protect the innocence of children? I wonder why we think all knowledge is at least neutral if not essentially good?"

In earlier generations there was a sense of what was right for children to know and when. As a baby boomer I was incredibly protected and naïve. Why have the adults decided that children need to know everything? Have we been driven by thinking that knowledge is power and that our children will be safer if they know things? Have we been naïve in not realising that knowledge can also be a corrupter? Have we also decided that the rights of adults to read, see or do whatever they want is more valid than what the young should be protected from seeing, reading and doing?

Dr Sandifer comes with a challenge to us as educators. We have a unique opportunity to speak to our communities. But, what are we to speak and how are we to speak? Straight moralism will not cut it, nor will being judgemental. We need to give our communities a "why".

Alister McGrath, in "Deep Magic, Dragons and Talking Mice: How reading CS Lewis can change your life" reminds us that we live in a world of competing stories. He writes that the current story in the West "is we are here by accident, meaningless products of a random process. We can only invent meaning and purpose in life and do our best to stay alive-even though there is no point to life"³. But he reminds us of a different story: "We are precious creatures of a loving God, who has created us for something special that we are asked to do. We have the privilege of being able to do something good and useful for God in the world,

³ McGrath, Alister. (2014). DEEP MAGIC, DRAGONS 7 TALKING MICE How reading C.S Lewis can change your life, Hodder & Stoughton An Hachette: UK Company. p 54

and need to work out what it is".⁴ This is the story we have to share with our communities because as McGrath writes, "The story we believe we are in determines what we think of ourselves and consequently how we live"⁵.

So to answer the question my community was asking me last week; "what will I do? We will continue to seek to develop young men and young women of character. Our parents choose us for values but if we only teach values we sell our students short. We will seek to grow in them habits of relating and living in the world as image bearers of God and so share the whole story of creation to restoration with them. We will explicitly teach and have them practise virtues which will grow into being marks of their character. We will explicitly teach humility to help our students to know their place in the world and to keep them open to being taught, grace so that they relate to others well, justice to lift their eyes from themselves to the wider world and compassion so that they might be able to put themselves in the shoes of others. It is these that will foster the right view of others, that will grow mutual respect and responsibility. In the same article as Professor Lumby's view, Dr Amy Shield Dobson stated "that there needs to be an emphasis on ethic, respect and responsibility"⁶.

If we are to be a prophetic voice we need to be sure of the story we are in, confident to share it and unashamed. Then we will speak out about what is happening to our young people because of their accidental and/or deliberate access to pornography and join those who are alarmed. We need to be those who are prepared to lobby our government to change to default, ISP-level, universal internet filtering and be prepared to be labelled by a society that seeks to deride those who dare to disagree.

Dr Sandifer's Paper challenges us to action not just to intellectual assent.

⁴ ibid p 54

⁵ ibid p 62

⁶ https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/aug/24/experts-criticise-paternalistic-response-to-schoolgirls-sharing-explicit-images?CMP=soc_568