

Testing times

I've just spent the first part of my morning sitting in on a Year 6 SATS exam as an observer, to check that nobody was gaining an unfair advantage. An hour of near silence is a gift for many of us, and I spent much of the time thinking about tests. Tests are a word that can conjure up fear in plenty of people, and rarely excitement in anyone. As I glanced across the room I was reminded that it was not only the children who were being tested, but also teachers and staff through Ofsted inspections. Naturally, this puts pressure on both students and teachers, who can be judged on the outcome of a range of questions over a few days in the year. Those sitting GCSEs and A-levels over the next few months will almost certainly have been exposed to the exterior pressure of shrinking their universe into the outcome of examination papers. Those exams are important, but they only give a fraction of information about the people sitting them.

Tests also have their benefits. For one thing, they can lend a focus and a deadline for honing and improving skills. For another, they offer an answer to the question that lurks for everyone who has brought up a child, or kicked a football, or used their creativity to produce something new: I wonder how I'm doing in relation to everyone else; I wonder how good I am at this? Not for nothing do cricket and rugby both describe the highest competitive levels of their respective sports as "test matches".

I wonder what a Christian theology of testing looks like? I have heard people at various stages of their lives describe the endurance of a difficult time in the language of a test from God. When we think about the Israelites in the desert, Jesus in the wilderness, or the sacrifices that the first Christians made for the sake of the Gospel, the idea that these things are tests does lend a certain perspective as to how we might make sense of them. In more than one place in the Old Testament, the imagery of fire is used to test the purity of metal as a metaphor for the formation of character and holiness. But the idea that God tests us also leaves an open question about the character of God. Is it not capricious and unloving to expose humans to conditions in which they might suffer merely to prove that even if they pass such a test they still fall short of God's glory? Furthermore, Jesus's rebuke to the Tempter in the wilderness is that it is not for us to put God to the test. Does God ask something of us that God is not prepared to undergo alongside us? That seems to me to be the antithesis of the Christ of the Gospels.

So what should we say about testing? Here are some of the conclusions I'm coming to. Firstly, and this might be an obvious thing to say, tests only provide the answers to the questions they ask. All of us are complex, diverse, and wonderfully made. That's not a truth that is revealed through comparison to others, or in an examination transcript. We lose sight of education as a gift when we treat it as an imposition or a means to an end. And that's part of the reason why it's unwise to test God. What possible question could we ask that could quantify how God feels about us?

God is revealed to us through a relationship and a person, not as the answer to a question. Secondly, preparation for tests, what Christians call "formation", is a healthy part of the Christian life. But I don't believe that the purpose of such formation is for some sort of cosmic quiz. It's simply to get us ready for heaven. Heaven is not a test of who we are, it's an exposure to the reality of what we look like

in the full glory of God. And that's something that is more than worth preparing for because it does what we hope that our teachers do: inspire us, challenge us, broaden and deepen us, and change us into the fullest glory of the people we were created to be.

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