



*'Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be shaken but endures for ever.'*

So says the writer of Psalm 125 (v.1, NIV). Sometimes places of education, in particular of Higher Education, can feel like vast, unshakeable monoliths, sucking up the privilege and prestige from the local area and beyond, and filling it seasonally with crowds of young adults.

But universities – indeed, all centres of education – need to be places of growth, change and flexibility. Education and research, by definition, require adaptability of thought and openness to new ideas. And they are, above all, places where ideas, beliefs and hypotheses – faith, though not just religious faith – are transformed into action with world-changing consequences. They bring together ideas and deeds, faith and works.

At their best, universities, colleges and schools are places where the radical equality that James calls for can become reality. When all are encouraged and enabled to reach their full potential, when effort is made to support those who might feel that university is not for them, and to facilitate those who have to overcome additional barriers to learning, then it is possible for all to be treated as equal in the sight of God.

Many universities, especially in industrial cities, were founded as civic institutions, funded by local people to meet the needs of the local community, producing doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers. They are now engaged in a renewed conversation about what it means to be a civic university in the 21st century, balancing local need with a global perspective. They seek to continue their mission, to change lives, but in new ways. And despite the inevitable constant undercurrent of funding bids and financial worries, universities are (usually) still concerned with being places of public good, recognising that ‘a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.’ (Proverbs 22:1, NRSV)

Too often, though, universities have been places of entrenched privilege, and differences between schools have deepened divisions and inequality. Perhaps James’s challenge, to turn our faith in God’s universal love into action, needs to be heard as a call for the transformative potential of education to be released. Christians have long understood this; this is why we have been involved in schools, colleges and universities, as sponsors, teachers, chaplains, and more.

Not least, churches were influential in setting up colleges to train and equip teachers. This ministry ensured that those responsible for the education of children were well prepared for the task. But it also helped to begin rebalancing another great inequality; by providing higher education and professional training for a great many women. And this year, we celebrate the centenary of the Representation of the People Act, giving all men and some women the vote. This was a campaign of women who were also committed to opening up higher education; of educated women, who wanted to use their learning in the service of their nation; and of men who were thinkers and philosophers and believed in equality. It was a campaign of those who learnt, and who turned their learning into understanding, and their understanding into action.

