

“I will mention the loving kindnesses of the Lord, and the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord hath bestowed on us”

At last, you say! Here you are on the last day of your last year of High School in the last hours of being high school students! Here you are, too, for the last time in Chapel – hip, hip, hooray, you say! – the last time, that is to say, as students. For today, you step up and step out and make the beginnings of a new beginning as graduates and alumni of King’s-Edgehill School, embarking upon new adventures with new and adult responsibilities. *You are on your own now, kid!* At last, you say!

But not quite and not really. For what we celebrate this day with you is but the culmination of one part of your education and leads invariably, we hope, in one way or another, to the continuation of the pursuit of education which has been part and parcel of your lives here, whether it has been for one year, two years, or more. You cannot, I remind you, simply walk away from the past. You can only take it with you. Today, you have simply arrived at another starting point. And it may be that in the years ahead you will look back and realize things about your time here which you didn’t fully realize at the time. You may come to see, as T.S. Eliot puts it, that *“to make an end is to make a beginning”* for *“we shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time”* (*The Four Quartets, “Little Gidding”*).

You are the pride of your parents and friends, grandparents and relations, teachers and coaches on this day; even more, you are the pride of this school. There is always an understandable degree of emotion to our celebrations with you on this day. For we have been through so much together – in the classroom, on the sports fields, on the march, on the stage, and yes, in Chapel, too, listening and learning, reading and writing, arguing and debating, singing and well, for some of you at any rate, *“vrooming”*. There have been the hard times and the sad, the good times and the bad, the times of struggle and pain, the times of hilarity and delight; in short, *the agony and the ecstasy* of a full and intensive programme of education.

How can there not be things which you take with you, things which have become part of you? Such things as gentleness and learning, compassion and understanding, toleration and patience, duty and discipline, honesty and humility, service and sacrifice, commitment and responsibility, the pursuit of excellence and the disdain for mediocrity, not to mention contempt for the half-baked and the half-assed! All the things belonging to the dignity of our humanity somehow go with you to the extent that you have made them your own and they have become part of you. In a way, it comes down to one word, *virtue*, a word signifying strength of personal character.

You go forth from us today but into what kind of a world? A world of woes, I am afraid to say, a world of wars and of rumours of wars, a world of fears and anxieties, of uncertainties and dangers, of economic, social and political unease, and of a spiritual distemper that is the malaise of modernity. I don't really need to tell you about that. Suffice to say, that the assumptions of the cold-war world belonging to your parents' generation no longer hold. You confront a new and different world. How will you face it? Like Miranda, perhaps, in Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*?

"O brave new world,/That has such people in 't", she exclaims with delight, even though that world she beholds, like our own, contains rascals and scoundrels, not to mention the easy deceits and confusions of our own hearts and minds that wreak such havoc in our own lives and the lives of others. Yet in the providential view of things, as Shakespeare seems to suggest, that world can be faced without succumbing to despair and dismay and we may even find "all of us ourselves/when no man was his own".

Education in its profoundest sense is always *counter-culture* precisely because it insists, or should insist, on the worth of learning in and of itself, promoting a culture of learning that honours the intellectual enterprise in its own integrity. This confidence in reason is the counter to the spiritual bankruptcy of the pragmatic hedonism of contemporary culture in its adolescent self-indulgence and, even more, to the dogmatic skepticisms of post-modernism which, as Christopher Butler has so cogently observed, *"belong to a long post-Nietzschean tradition of despair about reason"*. The consequence has been a serious disengagé and disconnect with the spiritual and intellectual principles belonging to the nature and character of the very institutions which shape and form our lives. Reason is not and cannot be merely a tool of our wills, of *"the devices and desires"* of our wayward hearts, as it were.

Against such tendencies in our contemporary world, there is the notable example of Boethius, a sixth century scholar and Christian who found himself languishing in prison in Ravenna, Italy, awaiting his execution at the hands of the Arian King, Theodoric the Ostrogoth on trumped-up charges of treason. His life's ambition, in the decay of the late Roman Empire, was to translate the works of Plato and Aristotle into Latin for the newly emerging Christian west, an ambition which remained largely unfulfilled, though much was accomplished by way of his theological treatises which contributed, in no small measure, to the language of theology and more for western Christianity. When we use the word *"person"*, for instance, we are really indebted to Boethius whose definition of person was used to explicate the mystery of the Trinity and only then subsequently applied to the understanding of our humanity. It is an example of one of those wonderful connections from the past which remain inescapably part of our discourse in the present.

While in prison Boethius wrote a remarkable treatise, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which has remained the *locus classicus* for the understanding of Providence ever since. It displays a most wonderful confidence in reason produced under the most difficult of situations. *O qui perpetua mundum ratione gubernas* – “O thou who dost rule the world with everlasting reason”. It was englished, by the way, by both Alfred the Great, Geoffrey Chaucer and Elizabeth the First.

In such a providential view of things, “sweet” even “are the uses of adversity”, it would seem, which “finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,/ Sermons in stones and good in everything” (*As You Like It*). But how can it be possible to think in such a fashion? In no small measure because of what we hear and contemplate here in the Chapel morning after morning, usually at an earlier hour, wonderfully captured for us today in the lessons which Dale and Sujana read.

“I will mention the loving kindnesses of the Lord and the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord hath bestowed on us”, we heard in the lesson which Dale read, words which open us out to a whole new perspective by recalling us to the created order in which we find ourselves, to a world called into being by the love of God, a love which is greater than our folly, the folly of our willful ways which reject the God upon which our thinking and our being depend; for “they”, we, “rebelled and grieved his holy Spirit”. Isaiah makes the profound point that in our rebellion God becomes our enemy because we have alienated ourselves from the truth which we have been given to know, in other words, we have rejected the reason of God. Simply left at that, it would be bad and sad news, but then as Isaiah says, God “remembered the days of old, of Moses his servant”, and suddenly, the great and definitive story of Israel’s deliverance from bondage and slavery is recalled. It becomes the paradigm of Israel’s life with God and parallels the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus which defines the pattern and meaning of Christian life. There is redemption.

In the lesson which Sujana read, we are given a vision of heaven and an image of Christ as the Lamb of God, the sacrificial victim for the redemption of the world, who alone can open the scroll or the book of life. It is a wonderful collocation of images – the Lamb who is the Word and Son of the Father opening out to us the providence of God for us. In a way, we read the providence of God in the story of Jesus. In his word is our life. Yet, like Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey*, we can only learn if we give our blood for the task, give of ourselves, that is to say, in order to enter into the pattern of understanding and make it our own.

But what are we doing? Precisely what belongs to intellectual life in its integrity. We are struggling to enter into the understanding through the images, in this case the images of Scripture.

We seek the *vernunft* – the understanding or reason – but without forsaking the appearances or images – the *vorstellung* – of Scripture through which we arrive at

the understanding. We cannot, as Hegel reminds us, “forsake the *vorstellung*” without leaving ourselves in the wilderness empty of understanding and barren of meaning, the wasteland of modernity, we might say.

But in Sujana’s and Dale’s readings there is a further lesson, a further point. And it, too, underlies the character of the educational programme here at King’s-Edgehill. At the long end of the day, it is about worship, about the worth of God, and about the worth of learning which begins and ends in prayer and praise.

There is another aspect to the contemporary world sometimes hidden and denied by the posturings of cynicism and the despair of reason which defeats each and every educational enterprise. I want to end not with *Boethius* but with the singer and writer, humanitarian and activist and sometime court jester at what was called the coronation of Paul Martin, namely, *Bono* of the rock-band U2, who brings out if not a yearning then at least an openness to the Sacred.

The son of a Protestant mother and a Catholic father in Ireland during the “troubles”, Bono recognized that “*the Prods had the better tunes and the Catholics had the better stage-gear*” and recalled that “*at age 12, I was a fan of [the Psalms of] David, he felt familiar...like a pop star could feel familiar*”. “*The words of the psalms were as poetic as they were religious*”. David “*was a star*”. Bono explains that “*words and music*” did for him “*what solid, even rigorous, religious argument could never do, they introduced me to God*”, though not necessarily to “*belief in God*” but “*more [to] an experiential sense of God*”. There is the paradox of being exposed to the words and music through the Church – whether Protestant or Catholic – and so to the teaching conveyed on the wings of the word.

“*Music*”, too, he points out “*is Worship; whether it’s worship of women or their designer, the world or its destroyer, whether it comes from that ancient place we call soul or simply the spinal cortex, whether the prayers are on fire with a dumb rage or dove-like desire...the smoke goes upwards [the incense that is the prayer of the saints?] ...to God or something you replace God with...usually yourself*”. Therein, of course, lies the danger, perennial and constant, of putting ourselves in the place of God, of which the best and only counter is to recall “*the loving kindnesses of the Lord*”.

The last track on U2’s album War is ‘40, a song based on Psalm 40 with a refrain from Psalm 6, “‘*How long’ (to sing this song)*”. It suggests that we may find in the witness of the Scriptures the deepest yearnings of our souls. As Bono puts it, “*I had thought of it as a nagging question – pulling at the hem of an invisible deity whose presence we glimpse only when we act in love. How long... hunger? How long...hatred? How long until creation grows up and the chaos of its precocious, hell-bent adolescence has been discarded?*” How long, indeed, how long?

I hope that your time here at King’s-Edgehill, too, has instilled at least the beginnings of a confidence in reason, in the intrinsic worth of learning and an openness to the Sacred that, just perhaps, will remain with you and come to the fore in the years ahead.

We shall miss you greatly for you have become quite dear to us all. We wish you Godspeed in all your future endeavours. As our German friends would say, *Auf Wiedersehen*, literally, until we see or meet again, and for that *Gott sei dank*, may God be thanked.

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*Rev'd David Curry
Chaplain
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