

A sermon preached on 5th July by the Bishop of Coventry at the 1100th Anniversary of Warwick School in the School Chapel

Reading Ecclesiasticus 44.1-15

Introduction

It is a great honour to preach on this momentous occasion of this venerable institution's 1100th Anniversary. I come with the greetings of Wigmund who was the Bishop of the day and, thereby, to remind you that the Church is even older!

Heroes, sung and unsung

The reading will be familiar to many of you from your final service in Warwick School. In the words of Sir David – who has just read it to us – to me a little while ago, 'it seems to sum up the way the world works'. Some people, many of them from this great institution make a mark on history that causes their name to be known, their lives commemorated and their work celebrated. Lists of students only began to be compiled in 1871, so we have little knowledge of the association with this school of the many men who undoubtedly made a lasting and memorable impact on the world but we honour them today along with the names that we do know about and, of course, the young men whose lives who laid down in conflict throughout the world for the cause of peace whose names are inscribed on the four memorials of this chapel, most recently among them, Joe Whittaker who was killed in Afghanistan in 2008 only two years or so after he left this school.

Of course, though, many – the greater number – of Old Warwickians do not have their names recorded in the public history of the nation. Nevertheless, our reading reminds us, they too are to be honoured and celebrated for, what the writer calls, 'their righteous deeds': their good and godly influence on their families, their contribution to the world through their work, their gifts of human kindness and friendship. Their unsung lives which have enriched others.

One of the ironies of modern life is that many of the heroes of which we have sung in our lives, those people who have reached some level of popular acclaim and notable achievement, are revealed to be flawed characters: politicians, business leaders, sportsmen and women, entertainment celebrities, editors of newspapers and Government advisers – even, I hasten to add, Church men and women.

These sad revelations of human failing drive us back to the heart of the reading which identifies human achievement with 'righteous deeds' – with lives that live in something that approximates to the wisdom and goodness of God. That is the sort of criteria that may be applied to a human life that is lived well – and those characteristics of a life well lived are to be found as much in the unsung as well as in the acclaimed heroes of humanity.

What did you bring with you?

I very much enjoyed reading the splendid *Warwick School: A Portrait* which tells the story of the evolution of the School, including its moves from St Mary's Churchyard to the present site

in the 1870's. 'The only items taken from the school's previous site' – it says – 'were oak beams for use in the construction of the Headmaster's pig sty'.

I liked the school rules from about the same time, penned by the Revd William Grundy, Head Master of the time: 'No boy may either use or possess a catapult. Pistols, canons and fire-arms of every sort are prohibited'.

That rule was admirably simplified in the new rules of the newly named Warwick School into: 'Firearms and catapults are forbidden'.

The first rule of that era is more general but very fine: 'Behaviour: Behave well, but naturally'.

How do we behave well, but naturally? How does good human living, the living that we all want to do, become something that we do, as it were, naturally, instinctively – not because we ought but because we want to live in this way.

Most of us have been around for a year or two. Many of us have been round the block a few times. We've seen a bit of life and made a few mistakes. Scratch us hard and we'll admit that we know too well that that a life well lived is not to be judged by prestige or power or property; nor even by our achievements in work, the arts, sport and so on.

We know it's much more about the quality of our relationships, the contribution we make to the betterment of others, our capacity to make some sort of small difference for the good of the world.

What did you take from this school?

What did you take from this school to help you live in that way, to live life well, and to live it well naturally?

What did this noble institution give to you to equip you for this way of living? More than a few pieces of wood to make a pig sty, I am sure.

May I point to one gift that this school gives to all who come to it? It's here inscribed on the wall behind me: 'Dominus Illuminatio Mea': words from my favourite psalm – 'God is my light'.

God is the light that gives life to the world and enables human beings to live in light.

What happens when we shine God's light on our understanding of human beings and on the role of education?

In God's light, in the light of God's love and God's purposes the collection of chemicals that make up a human being – a young pupil of this school or an old alumnus or alumna of this school – are seen to be a unique human person loved into life by an eternally loving Creator who makes each of us in his own image and thereby endows us with infinite worth and immense possibility.

In God's light, the role education is to raise each child to their full human dignity as people of infinite value and immeasurably immense possibility.

May this great institution, 1100 years old, go on educating people into the light of God that enables them to see themselves in this way and rise to their full human dignity as sons and daughters of God. And, in so doing, may this House, indeed, flourish.

And may this happy day of reunion also become for each of us a day of refocusing our lives by the light of God: that we may see ourselves in the light of God's love and recommit ourselves to living in that light in which we too – whatever age and whatever the years have done to us – rise up to our full dignity and seek to live out the righteous deeds that, in the light of God, will never be eclipsed from the annals of human history, even if they remain hidden for a time. May all your houses flourish.