

A Sermon in King's College Chapel

21 October 2018

I had cause to wonder, last week, whether either I had mistaken the glorious coppers, scarlets and golds of the season for blossom and buds, as it seemed to be early April again. My momentary uncertainty was prompted by the news that, across the nation, horse racing authorities will be spotted with brush in hand during the off-season as they re-colour the standard orange framework of race fences fluorescent yellow and white. The reason for the change? It turns out that horses actually see orange as a shade of green: an unreasonable extra hurdle – excuse the pun – to the obstacles they already face. A minor change, really, although one which, I am sure, will generate much discussion: change does seem to.

Next week is 'One World Week', the theme for which, this year, is change. More specifically, it is a question – even the challenge – offered to us: The World is Changing – How About Us? Of course, the remit of this falls far beyond my little world (which, indeed, I expect is part of the point for each of us!) but looking closest to home seemed the most practical approach for me to address the central topic.

In education, the concept of change crosses our horizon in numerous guises, often receiving a mixed response: changes of policy at national level, changes commensurate with the beginning of a new academic year, and changes, particularly, in our children, necessitating our own change to fulfil our responsibilities and purpose of best supporting and guiding them. Of course, the other, perhaps biggest aspect of change we need to consider is the future and all that it will, may, and even won't hold. As someone who looks relentlessly forward, agreeing with Jefferson that 'I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past', it occurred to me that a look back might be useful in preparing for whatever lies ahead and thus, to the library, I made my way. Our archive of the school magazine, the 'Fleur de Lys' aided my enquiry.

1984, I discovered, was a significant year of change. The Fleur notes the newly established Computer Laboratory: Edward Chadwyck-Healey (aged 12) explains in

it that ‘Computers dominate today’s society’, little anticipating how fundamental they would become in what was then tomorrow’s! He continued, ‘They are used for all types of jobs, much to the irritation of many unemployed.’ A topic that is strangely current, as we consider Alexa and other increasingly imminent robotic domestic aids. He ended in hope that ‘maybe soon the school will get a printer’ and asserts that ‘computers are good fun, necessary and very worthwhile’. High praise! I can assure him that the school does, indeed, now have a printer; and what place of work, today, functions without such technology?

More distant than this, I enjoyed the following extract from the then Headmaster Gerald Peacocke’s Letter of December 1979: ‘Looking back ... I can at least confidently say that the School is buoyant ... it is in good heart’. He continues, ‘Even that phenomenon of mothers’, matrons’, and teachers’ despair, the lost and missing property is gradually, gradually improving ...’ Aa! And there we have it: some things, however encouraging the tone in which they are articulated, some things never change!

Shortly prior to this, 1976 saw an event quite momentous in any school’s history: the admission of Day Girls. As changes can, this yielded a vehement reaction. Wynne Godley (Fellow of King’s) had a daughter in the first cohort and, when invited to contribute to the Fleur, included this wonderful anecdote: ‘On the second day when we drove into the drive, there were, I should think, ten boys with arms linked across the drive. It was a well organised protest because they made neither sound nor movement and there was not a smile between them. Naturally I accelerated and broke it up. However, there was one braver than the rest who stood his ground and I had to make a detour, so the honours were roughly even’.

I could delve only a little further back than this; December 1961 saw the first printed School Magazine. Alongside some rather brilliant poetry written by the then only boys – complemented by a recipe ‘An Easy Way to Make Invisible Ink’, a concoction I would have shared with you this morning were it not for my remembering that the younger ears in our midst have both pencil and paper to hand; at least one of them would consider the imminent Year 8 exams an excellent

opportunity at which to trial such a potion, I am sure - I discovered that this first edition in fact contains two letters from the College.

The first is a fascinating and detailed history of the School, written by Mr John Saltmarsh (formerly Vice-Provost); it ends with a reported recollection of a chorister from the 1850's, whose tale must surely have reached the ears of a certain Charles Dickens. It was said that the Master "used to whack them – whack them!" to which the rejoinder of the time was "Very proper – very proper!" How things do change!

The second letter was from the literary giant E M Forster, who was invited, as a Kingsman and friend of the School, to write a special article. And through the varied commentary of EM, we see yet another generation of change: in comparison to the School of 1961, he lamented, in his prep school of seventy years before, the lack of private bathing space, the drear of the acting and the limitation of the only music piece being 'a piano piece for six hands – three little boys fighting and scratching for their notes and I in the middle'. One particular memory – or rather lack of it - he shared: 'all I remember of science is a gentleman coming in with a daisy root and trying to tell us why it grew, but he couldn't keep order, we all sang "Daisy, Daisy" and he had to go away'.

Although there was much he remembered fondly – the masters, the playing fields and the food – his real disappointment was that 'We were just told that "school is the world in miniature" and as far as my experience goes it isn't'. By 1961, we were more enlightened on this front. David Briggs, Headmaster of the time, stated his own view thus: 'I believe that the secret of education is to find, for each boy, something which evokes a response, which kindles a spark; something to which he feels an impulse to commit himself; something in which he loses himself. In the long run, it does not greatly matter whether initially this "something" is keeping immaculate exercise books, keeping wicket, or keeping white mice. The point is that once the process has started, and provided it is guided wisely and sympathetically, there is no stopping it'. And, despite the advent of girls, the explosion in technology, and the many other changes to education nation and worldwide, this same truth remains at its heart.

One of the first attractions of King's College School as a place to work was, for me, the final sentence of the Mission Statement: 'We prepare them [the pupils] as individuals to be confident in a future of exceptional possibilities'. Recognising the impossibility of knowing what lies ahead, and yet pledging to furnish each next generation to be ready for whatever it may be, seems our best way forward in the face of change. And so, on the eve of One World Week, perhaps we can look ahead knowing that, despite the cold hard knot of fearfulness that so often grips us at its contemplation, we have some history of improving principles in good conscience, and improving our methods only, when our principles are sound. This change, of course, extends far beyond the world of education: change in how we live, even challenging our own comfort where it is at the expense of others; change to our economies, change on a practical level – to travel and infrastructure - change in our assumptions, expectations and fears relating to our fellow man. The future is indeed of exceptional possibilities, and that, surely, is a good thing.

And as we have seen, not everything changes. Our readings today offer a shared and invaluable reassurance: with the enduring qualities of honesty, graciousness, and generosity; through the fact of having faith; we face every tomorrow, whatever its challenge, in the best of company.

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