



DOWNSIDE SCHOOL

Head Master's Assembly, 1st July 2016

Good morning pupils.

Today we remember St Oliver Plunkett, whose feast it is, and we also remember the 100th year anniversary of the first day of the Somme, probably the worst battle in British History, in the wholesale slaughter that was known as the First World War.

The first day of the Battle of the Somme was probably the worst single day of that war with nearly 60,000 casualties on the British side alone; over a million people died in the battle as a whole, including soldiers from both sides.

In a moment, I will read an extract from a novel *Birdsong*, by the author Sebastian Faulks, after which we will pause for silence to pray for the souls of those killed in that battle and to remember them, remembering as we do that the nave of this great Abbey church was built in memory of the war dead. At the end of this assembly we will also sing the School Song, written by an OG and former Head Boy, Lieutenant Stephen Hewitt, ancestor of our current Head Boy, William Harwood. Stephen was killed in the Battle of the Somme, like so many others.

"The bombardment reached its peak. The air overhead was packed solid with noise that did not move. It was as though waves were piling up in the air but would not break. It was like no sound on earth. Jesus, said Stephen, Jesus, Jesus. The mine went up on the ridge, a great leaping core of compacted soil, the earth eviscerated. Flames rose to more than a hundred feet. It was too big, Stephen thought. The scale appalled him. Shock waves from the explosion ran through the trench. Brennan was pitched forward off the firestep and broke his leg.

We must go now, thought Stephen. No word came. Byrne looked questioningly at him. Stephen shook his head. Still ten minutes.

German fire began at one. The lip of the British trench leapt and spat soil where machine guns raked it. Stephen ducked. Men shouting. 'Not yet.' Stephen screaming. The air above the trench now solid.

The second hand of his watch in slow motion. Twenty-nine past. The whistle in his mouth. His foot on the ladder. He swallowed hard and blew.

He clambered out and looked around him. It was for a moment completely quiet as the bombardment ended and the German guns also stopped. Skylarks wheeled and sang high in the cloudless sky. He felt alone, as though he had stumbled on this fresh world at the instant of its creation.

Then the artillery began to lay down the first barrage and the German machine guns resumed. To his left Stephen saw men trying to emerge from the trench but being smashed by bullets before they could stand. The gaps in the wire became jammed with bodies. Behind him the men were coming up. He saw Gray run along the top of the trench, shouting encouragement.

He walked hesitatingly forward, his skin tensed for the feeling of metal tearing flesh. He turned his body sideways, tenderly, to protect his eyes. He was hunched like an old woman in the cocoon of tearing noise.

Byrne was walking beside him at the slow pace required by their orders. Stephen glanced to his right. He could see a long, wavering line of khaki, primitive dolls progressing in tense deliberate steps, going down with a silent flap of arms, replaced, falling, continuing as though walking into a gale. He tried to catch Byrne's eye but failed. The sound of machine guns was varied by the crack of snipers and the roar of the barrage ahead of them.

He saw Hunt fall to his right. Studd bent to help him and Stephen saw his head opening up bright red under machine gun bullets as his helmet fell away.

His feet pressed onwards gingerly over the broken ground. After twenty or thirty yards there came a feeling that he was floating above his body, that it had taken on an automatic life of its own over which he had no power. It was as though he had become detached, in a dream, from the metal air through which his flesh was walking."

Pause for prayer: two minutes of silence.

Remembering warfare – which is caused when politics goes wrong – is sobering, however, pupils I hope you are all feeling full of joy, after the three days in June and that you are all feeling happy, as you look forward to the summer holiday. It has been great to see you involved in such a range of fun activities over recent days, from energetic samba drumming to sport, to a photography competition, to Art and Design project work with pupils from All Hallows, to drama, to a pop concert and much else besides ... well done to all of you on throwing yourself into the range of activities with such bravado and making it all such a success.

One event among many has stood out: Father James has organised a pilgrimage to Glastonbury each year – in recent years - for 3 Days in June but sadly this year was unable to do so. However three third form boys decided to take up the baton - with a bit of a twist; they decided to do away with the need for a minibus to pick them up at Glastonbury and to walk the return journey instead (very environmentally friendly). The three boys concerned were Gregor Gaggero, Sam Kennard and Simon Quinlan. This was no mean undertaking, in that they also planned their route, organised kit and rations, and for good measure chose a good cause, Mary's Meals, setting up a Virgin Giving page for donations. They have, as of this morning raised £2,365. The walk in its entirety is 36 miles, stopping at various landmarks and churches to read passages from the Gospel. Simon walked 30 miles before his feet got the better of him. Gregor and Sam completed the full distance. Mr Macgreevy also completed the full distance and was accompanied part way by Mr Storey and part way by Mr Hobbs. All three staff were enormously impressed not just by the sheer physical effort of the boys but mostly by their determination and courage and most impressive of all their cheerfulness and positivity, which never diminished during the 14 hours it took them.

I think that this event especially is typical of the spirit of pupils at Downside. Many congratulations to those involved.

It has been a busy year here at Downside; if you think back over the course of the year and consider all the different things that you have done here, the trips and visits, the classes in a range of subjects, the different sports, concerts, plays, Masses, special events and also the social highlights, it is quite astonishing to consider all that has been done, and all that has been achieved.

I will be handing over to the Head Boy and the Head Girl in a moment or two but before I do so, please can I invite you to make a commitment to have a positive and productive summer.

In the assembly before Half Term, I invited you to reflect on what has gone well this year – I wonder how that process of self-reflection is going? What are the moments that we are particularly proud of? What are the moments which went less well? What are the moments we have learnt from, that we would do differently if we had a second chance? No one is perfect, and we have to some extent accept one another's shortcomings, just as no school is perfect, nor any family, but if we all reflect on the past and learn from it, we can improve, we can be better, personally and collectively.

What are the moments this year that for good or bad you will remember for the rest of your life?

The most important things that we have done this year, are what the poet Wordsworth refers to as

that best portion of a good man's life,

His little, nameless, unremembered, acts

Of kindness and of love.

The most important things that we do are the often anonymous acts of Christian kindness that may even go unnoticed, but which show love.

Do please remember to be kind to one another not only during your time here at Downside but also during the Summer, at home amongst your family and friends. Building community is important in all contexts, as St Benedict taught us.

Division can happen by contrast in all kinds of communities and even in families. It's like the story where a little girl asked her mother, "How did the human race appear?"

The mother answered, "God made Adam and Eve and they had children, and so was all mankind made.."

Two days later the girl asked her father the same question... The father answered, "Many years ago there were monkeys from which the human race evolved."

The confused girl returned to her mother and said, "Mummy, how is it possible that you told me the human race was created by God, and Daddy said they developed from monkeys?"

The mother answered, "Well, dear, it is very simple. I told you about my side of the family and your father told you about his."

Well, this holiday, let's all think about how we can be kind and build a sense of shared perspective both in our families at home and amongst our friends and also amongst our community at school when we return in September. For those of you who are leaving this term, pupils and staff, we thank you for your contribution; you will always be part of our school community, the wider Downside community of Friends and OGS.

Next term will see a new initiative here at Downside, which we hope will further develop that sense of active loving-kindness in our school community. In September we will be planning for a proper culmination to the Jubilee Year of Mercy, with October being designated a special month of Service for the School. A range of activities will take place where service to others will happen in a spiritual context, in a way which I hope you will find both enjoyable and personally beneficial. You will have special opportunities for servant leadership within the programme, which will be revisited subsequently in Lent, during the month of February and then later in the year in June ... but more of that anon.

Next term will be exciting with new pupils and staff arriving and work happening on new school facilities such as the Music School. There is much to look forward to.

In terms of leaders for the school, it is always a pleasure to announce the names of the new School Senior Prefects, so I will do that now.

[The Head Master reads the list of Senior Prefects]

Many congratulations to you all and to your deputies and to house prefects as well.

We look forward to your period of service within the school.

I would like to pause here just to say a word of thanks to two leavers – Florenzia Winter and Francisca Aller, our Manquehue friends and members for a time of the St Scholastica Community.

It has been a real joy having you with us these past months. I would like to thank you on behalf of the whole school community – you have supported the spiritual life of the school hugely, especially in service and in Lectio Divina. God bless you ... I have a small gift for you as a token of our thanks.

God bless you and a safe journey back to Chile.

There follow speeches by the Head Boy & Head Girl.

Then Dom Boniface gives an address on St Oliver Plunkett.

The Gospel Reading for Today is chosen especially for the Feast of St Oliver Plunkett. Dom Boniface has spoken eloquently about St Oliver ... he is an important saint for Downside.

The Gospel Reading is about how Christ wants to bind us all into one faith in Christian unity. Our faith is about bringing people together, not encouraging division.

A Reading from the Holy Gospel according to John 10: 11-16

I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

The hired man, since he is not the shepherd and the sheep do not belong to him, abandons the sheep as soon as he sees a wolf coming, and runs away, and then the wolf attacks and scatters the sheep; he runs away because he is only a hired man and has no concern for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for my sheep.

And there are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and I must lead these too. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock, one shepherd.

The Gospel of the Lord

Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.

In a similar way, the theme of Pope Francis' most recent teaching to his Church is on togetherness, on the joy of love, on the importance of love in families and in communities, and including schools. He ends with a prayer to the Holy Family which I will read to you know. Let's pray it together as we plan to spend more time with our families and friends over the Summer:

Prayer to the Holy Family

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
in you we contemplate
the splendour of true love;
to you we turn with trust.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
grant that our families too
may be places of communion and prayer,
authentic schools of the Gospel
and small domestic churches.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
may families never again experience
violence, rejection and division;
may all who have been hurt or scandalized
find ready comfort and healing.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
make us once more mindful
of the sacredness and inviolability of the family, and its beauty in God's plan.
Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
Graciously hear our prayer.
Amen.

Head Girl reads a 'Prayer for the End of Term'.

Head Boy:

We will conclude with the Lord's prayer:

Our Father, Who art in heaven

Hallowed be Thy Name;

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

and forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us;

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil. Amen.

The School Song