



DOWNSIDE SCHOOL

Hymn Practice Speech – 2nd September 2016

Dr Whitehead

Well good afternoon everyone and (once more) welcome to the new academic year at Downside. It is a real pleasure to be able to welcome the new pupils and staff today alongside all those members of the school community who remain with us from last academic year.

For those who are new to Downside, this is the moment of the week when after practising our singing, we stop for a moment to reflect. Very often as Head Master, I speak to you for a few moments, hopefully not too pompously, or another senior member of staff says a few words in my stead. Then we reflect on the Gospel for Sunday together, so that you get chance to mull over that passage from the New Testament before you hear it again on Sunday. We do this because we hope that the text will contain a spiritual message for you; the interpretation may differ from time to time, however, so it is up to you to decide whether or not that message makes sense to you, intellectually and spiritually. I hope it will!

Before we do that, however, it is worth mentioning to you how proud I am as a Head Master of all of the pupils who took public examinations last year. Our academic results were once again very strong indeed – the best of the major Catholic coeducational schools – and better than other local independent schools. Nearly a third of A Level students achieved straight A*/A grades, for example. 45% of all grades were graded A* or A, which is impressive. And at GCSE, there were some excellent achievements as well, with two pupils, Matthew Walters and Louisa Zeissner, achieving 10A*s and an A each.

However, there is no room for complacency. I was a bit concerned that both at A level and at GCSE there were a number of pupils who might have obtained As and Bs who slipped a grade to Bs and Cs, or lower than that. And there will be some members of the Fifth and Sixth Form here today, who know that they could have done better. This suggests that we need to reflect collectively on how we can improve further.

It is always a pleasure to see pupils return and start the term with a smile on their face; it is a time for new beginnings. Pastorally, I hope you all have a joyful, positive year; please remember that some things cannot be tolerated at Downside, such as unkindness to others, misuse of technology, or substance abuse. Avoiding mistakes in areas such as these is essential if you are to have a successful career at Downside. Please remember this and never put your place here in jeopardy.

Now, I don't know about you but I was genuinely inspired by the Olympics. There was much to celebrate. I realise that not all of you are from the United Kingdom; I hope nevertheless that all of you had something to cheer about as representatives of your own country achieved medals or at least performed well.

My favourite moment of the Olympics? Well, the Pierre de Coubertin medal has only been awarded 17 times in Olympic history; it's a medal named after the founder of the modern Olympics movement. New Zealand runner Nikki Hamblin and American Abbey D'Agostino became the 18th and 19th recipients of the unusual award — but not because of what they achieved in their running. Instead, they received this rare prize because they displayed an extraordinary act of sportsmanship,

They were 3,000 meters into the 5,000 meter race when Hamblin clipped D'Agostino unintentionally, bringing both runners down. D'Agostino convinced Hamblin to get back up and carry on — but it turned out D'Agostino was hurt. Together, they managed to encourage each other to finish the race. Their sportsmanship was acknowledged in the award they were given. What a great example of how to conduct yourself in sport.

I was also touched a few days ago when I heard that the Polish shot put silver medal winner, Piotr Malachowski, had sold his medal to help fund the treatment of a young boy with cancer. So the Olympics was not just about being a winner but about being a role model in many different ways.

However, Team GB did excel themselves, achieving a second place in the Medals table after the USA, and proving that their approach to achieving success is working. Today, one of two of you may have noticed that I am wearing my Union Jack socks as a tribute to this achievement! ... What lies behind this success? Well lottery funding has made a huge difference in recent years, allowing athletes who are selected for sponsorship to have the time to focus on their sport, but there is more to it than this. A new specialism has grown up in strategic planning in the British Olympic organisation - over at least 8 year periods – and this happens in combination with scientific research into performance; there is a sporting talent identification programme and also a belief in the importance of focusing on marginal gains, those minor improvements in kit, training and psychology which cumulatively make a significant difference ... it was exciting to see so many British athletes win medals that we became almost complacent at times that contenders would inevitably win. It did not always happen, but it often did.

We can learn from this. There may be a few naturally brilliant academic students who will sail through to top grades in their studies, but for most human beings, this isn't what happens; a focused approach is needed, learning from mistakes, looking for improvements and working hard. The same goes for Music and Drama, just as it does for Sport. If everyone does this, and shows the kind of humility that was characteristic of most of our athletes in Rio, team Downside will also do well.

The New Zealand national rugby team 'sweeps the sheds' as they call it after every match, meaning that they tidy up their changing room so that others do not have to do so for them; we can show a similar humility here at school, knowing that when we are humble, think of others and work hard, we will achieve more for ourselves and our team. I wish all of you a tremendously successful school year here at Downside. Please bear these reflections in mind.

Next month we will provide you all with a wonderful opportunity to show your leadership potential and also your capacity to help others, when we have a month of service in the school, during the month of October. This will help bring the Catholic Church's Jubilee Year of Mercy to an appropriate conclusion here. As we plan a range of activities, do pass on any suggestions you have for service activities to Mr Hobbs, the Deputy Head Master, or to Mr

Potter, the Director of the Wider Curriculum, or to a member of the St Scholastica Community, our Chilean team who are based in the Chaplaincy centre. They will be keen to hear your thoughts and suggestions.

In this Sunday's Gospel reading, Christ asks for a similar kind of commitment from his disciples. He asks them to forsake the comfort of home and an easy life, for commitment to him. Now we can't all necessarily tread the path of extreme poverty, but nevertheless Christ's message is important for us; if we obsess about material things, we won't get very far spiritually. We should try to be single-minded in our attempts to live a Christian life; good things will come out of that.

A Reading from the Holy Gospel according to Luke 14:25-33

Great crowds accompanied Jesus on his way and he turned and spoke to them. 'If any man comes to me without hating his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his own life too, he cannot be my disciple. Anyone who does not carry his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

'And indeed, which of you here, intending to build a tower, would not first sit down and work out the cost to see if he had enough to complete it? Otherwise, if he laid the foundation and then found himself unable to finish the work, the onlookers would all start making fun of him and saying, "Here is a man who started to build and was unable to finish." Or again, what king marching to war against another king would not first sit down and consider whether with ten thousand men he could stand up to the other who advanced against him with twenty thousand? If not, then while the other king was still a long way off, he would send envoys to sue for peace. So in the same way, none of you can be my disciple unless he gives up all his possessions.'