

Curiosity

Assembly by Alastair Tighe, Head Master, September 2019

“What does this mean?”

Imagine, for a moment, what it would be like if we lived in a world where no-one asked any questions.

Have a think about how many questions you have already asked since waking up this morning. I suspect you'll find that it's been quite a few. Some of them you will have spoken out loud; others you will have asked yourself internally - what shirt shall I wear today? Shall I have jam or marmalade on my toast? Which seat shall I sit in for Cathedral?

Human beings are, by their very nature, inquisitive and curious. We like to ask questions. We *need* to ask questions. In fact, asking questions is crucial to our survival, and has certainly been crucial to our development as a species. And that's certainly one reason why we go to school - to ask questions, because it's often by asking questions that we learn the most.

Some of you will have recognized that our reading today was an account of the story of Pentecost.

Pentecost, or Whitsun as it is sometimes called, took place 50 days after Jesus' resurrection and ten days after his ascension into heaven. Christians believe it was the moment God sent the Holy Spirit into the world to enable Jesus' disciples - and all human beings - to continue the work begun by Jesus during his earthly life, and to live by the example he set.

The appearance of the Holy Spirit inspires the Apostles. It gives them gifts and abilities, as well as the confidence to leave the confines of the Upper Room where - after Jesus's Ascension - they had locked themselves away out of fear, bewilderment and a lack of understanding. Now, they go out into the busy streets of Jerusalem to start talking and preaching to the people and, as the reading told us, “declaring the wonders of God”.

The arrival of the Holy Spirit causes quite a dramatic change in the Apostles. But I suppose that this isn't particularly surprising given the dramatic way the Spirit arrives in the first place: a sound like a violent wind blows through the whole house, and the Spirit appears as **tongues of fire** which rest on each of the Apostles.

I've always been fascinated by the detail that this enabling Spirit came as fire. Fire, which is full of energy and power; fire, which can be hugely destructive and yet hugely beneficial

when harnessed correctly; fire, which can be warming and comforting but also angry and frightening. And it is the fire of the sun, of course, which is the source of all life.

There is nothing moderate or half-hearted about fire. It is indeed a force of nature in that phrase's truest sense, compelling responses which are extreme and passionate.

And so I think the story of Pentecost is a good one to reflect on at the start of a new school year. It encourages us to be almost forceful in our determination to achieve what we want to achieve. The story inspires us not to sit unnoticed behind locked doors, but to be confident in setting ourselves goals and to then go about achieving those goals purposefully and eagerly - like a spreading fire.

The story of Pentecost also reminds me of another phrase I quoted at the end of last term on Speech Day. These are the words of the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, one of the 20th century's foremost literary figures, who said that: "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire".

My hope for this academic year is that in every single one of you a flame will be lit which will inspire you to pursue your goals; will make you passionate about the things you love, yet caring and kind enough to accept the things you don't. I don't mind what that passion or passions might be - they might be musical or sporting, academic or dramatic, charitable or entrepreneurial.

Our job as teachers is to try and help you find and develop a passion or passions which propel you and sustain you long beyond your time here at Wells. But if we are going to be successful in achieving that, we need *you* to be willing enough, open-minded enough, determined enough and curious enough to want to discover those passions.

And there's that word again - curious. "*What does it all mean?*"

Human curiosity has been the driving force behind our human development, behind developments in science, language, religion, the arts and industry. Indeed, just imagine where we would be as a human race if our forebears hadn't been curious - if they hadn't wanted to explore, or investigate or to learn.

And so now it falls to us to remain curious and inquisitive, and to want to learn more about who we are, where we have come from and what future possibilities there are for us - both as individuals and as a race. Yet we are called not simply to be passively curious but determinedly curious - to seek out the answers to our questions with fire in our belly and with a blazing mind.

Indeed, if you look into the origins or etymology of the word 'curious' you will find that it stems from the Latin word *curiosus* which didn't mean being eager to know or learn something, but rather meant being careful, or diligent or thoughtful. In other words, being curious is about taking care - taking care of ourselves, of each other, of our world. How, then, can our being curious be anything but a force for good in the world?

Just one final point. The account of Pentecost tells us that there were people in Jerusalem at the time, and I quote, “from every nation under heaven”. We learn that the people who heard the Apostles speaking in their language came from Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and Rome. There were Jews, Cretans and Arabs there.

In other words, at the moment the Apostles started their work to encourage all people to learn from the example of Jesus, their message was for everyone. So many nationalities, so many cultures, so many opinions, so many views. You can be certain that with so much difference on display, there would have been disagreement. But that didn't stop the people in Jerusalem that day, whoever they were and wherever they came from, from being curious. “*What does this mean?*” they asked, and they almost certainly received differing opinions and different explanations.

And so we are reminded that in our curiosity we need to be open-minded enough to understand different perspectives from our own. We need to enquire about why people might think or behave or live differently from ourselves. We need to do this in order to expand our knowledge and perspective, and not to close down our world-view by our own narrow-mindedness. Let's turn refusal of difference into acceptance of difference; let's not be frightened or nervous of difference, but let's delight in it.

And so as we start the first full week of our new academic year, may I humbly propose that each of us - here and now - commits to four resolutions which we intend to live out in the fullest way possible. I proposed three of these - work hard, play hard and be kind - in our start of term assembly on Friday, and to these I add a fourth today:

Work hard, play hard; be kind and be curious.