

Finding Sanctuary

Assembly by Alastair Tighe, Head Master, April 2019

How did you react when you saw the pictures and footage of Notre Dame Cathedral burning? How did you feel as you witnessed the flames consume the 800 year old roof, or as the iconic central spire fell crashing to the floor of the nave? Like the thousands of Parisians who left their homes to see the tragedy work itself out for real on the streets around the cathedral, were you willing the heroic firefighters on so that they could contain the flames before they reached and destroyed the famous west end towers? Were you stirred by the French President's vow to rebuild the cathedral? Perhaps you were even moved to donate money towards the costs of that rebuild.

Or was your reaction one of indifference? Maybe you felt it was nothing to do with you and you didn't care. Perhaps you felt it was just a building - and a religious building at that - so what was all the fuss about? Perhaps you, like many others, are incredulous that people should rush to donate money to the cause of rebuilding Notre Dame when there are so many other causes in need of money - often causes which are associated with people rather than bricks and mortar.

For me personally, watching Notre Dame burn was heart-wrenching. I have had the opportunity to visit the Cathedral on many occasions, and I vividly remember spending a Sunday morning as an undergraduate in the famous organ loft watching the amazing talented Olivier Latry, one of the Cathedral organists, improvise accompaniments for the Sunday masses. For me, watching Notre Dame burn was like watching an iconic page in the book of human history being torn out and ripped up; and as I watched that cathedral burn I couldn't but help think about our own wonderful cathedral here in Wells and imagine what it would feel like if this iconic place was burned to the ground.

Of course, I do have sympathy with those who argue that Notre Dame is only a building; that the sums of money which will need to be spent to raise it to its former glory could be directed elsewhere. But I would argue that re-directing such funds and resources wouldn't make a better or bigger difference to the world; it would just make a different, but equally important, difference.

When I was at school, I was taught Latin by a man called Mr Fisher. Mr Fisher was a huge influence on me - not so much because of his skill as a Classicist but because of his knowledge and passion about everything! He was a true polymath, whose classroom was

full of posters and books on culture, history, literature and art. He always had books laid out on his desk at the front of the classroom - and one book to which he often referred called *Civilisation* by an eminent English historian called Kenneth Clarke. Clarke set out to try and define, by studying examples of human endeavour and art, what it means to say that human beings are civilised. Not long after he published his book he made a series of documentaries for the BBC based on his research, again entitled *Civilisation*. You can view them on YouTube now, and although they look and feel rather dated by our own standards today, at the time of their original broadcasting in the late 1960s they were groundbreaking and iconic.

They were made at a time when the western world was firmly entrenched in the Cold War. The memory of the Cuban Missile Crisis was strong, and the threat of nuclear war's ability to obliterate the world as it was known was a very real, and possibly, even imminent one. Clarke's motivation in making his documentaries, therefore, was to try and identify all that had evolved to make the human race so civilised and what was at stake should the world dissolve into nuclear war. And in the opening minutes of the very first documentary, Clarke is filmed standing on the banks of the River Seine overlooking Notre Dame cathedral. And he opens his broadcast with these words: "What is civilisation? I don't know. I can't define it in abstract terms yet. But I think I can recognise it when I see it. And I'm looking at it now" - and he turns to look at Notre Dame.

For him, and for so many millions of other people, Notre Dame represents all that is best about being human - it is a record of human history, an example of human engineering and scientific skill, a repository of amazing artistic work, a spiritual place which has touched the hearts of believers and nonbelievers alike for centuries, and a living and tangible example of the kind of amazing positive things humans can achieve when their focus and attitude points in the right direction. And because it is all these things, it has provided a sacred space set apart from everyday life in which generations of people have found the space and time to be restful, silent, thoughtful, peaceful. It is, in the truest sense of the word, a sanctuary.

All of us need to find our own place of sanctuary. Somewhere we can feel secure and safe, where we can stop and take stock, be at one with our thoughts, and give ourselves the space and time to step back from our busy and varied lives, and just be.

Different people have different sanctuaries. For some, it might be taking a walk in the country, for others it might be meditation or going for a run, reading a book or visiting an art gallery. Many people have more than one sanctuary. As a School, we encourage you all to take advantage of the numerous opportunities you have here and at home to find your own sanctuary. And that's one of the reasons why we gather as a community each week here in this place - our very own Notre Dame. This time each week is provided as an opportunity for us all to wallow in our own 'cradle of civilization' and to give ourselves the time and space to think and reflect and to find sanctuary.

The need to find sanctuary both physically and mentally hasm I would argue, never been greater given all the things that we are now required to do and given all the things that fight

for our attention and time. This has become especially noticeable with the rise of mobile technology and the internet's and social media's pull on us all in so many different ways. We are holding a Digital Awareness week here at School this week, and in various assemblies, tutor group discussions and classes, we are going to encourage the whole community to think about our relationship with and use of mobile technology, and how we can maximise its many positive benefits without helplessly succumbing to its power and many negatives. Today's theme is 'The Battle for your Attention' - and I commend to you an email Mr Balderson has sent you this morning which contains some very wise advice. We are called to reflect on what the CEO of Netflix recently stated when he said the for technology firms like his, the greatest competition they have is humans' need to sleep. These are companies which are actively seeking to rob you of your sleep, of time for yourself and of opportunities to be truly alive and truly human. And so we need to realise that and seek out ways of fighting that battle so that we, not our social media feeds, come out on top.

For me, therefore, it's entirely appropriate that we start a week here at School which will focus on our relationship with digital technology and its potential power over us, here in a building we are privileged and lucky to have as our own School's sanctuary.

But this place and this time is about so much more than just finding sanctuary from our phones. Far more importantly, this place is about finding sanctuary for us - for you and me. We are given the time and space, even if only briefly, to remind ourselves about what it means to be a community and what it means to be ourselves. Just like Jesus who reclaimed the Temple in Jerusalem to be a place of sanctuary by driving out the traders and money-lenders, let's all, in our own way, drive out the things that have the potential to remove us from ourselves, to find our own spaces to just be, and to cherish those times and places of sanctuary in our lives which help to make us not just civilised people, but better people.