

Come down from the mountain: living by our School CARE values

Assembly by Alastair Tighe, Head Master, September 2024

(Reading: Mark 9:2-10; The Transfiguration)

I know it already seems like a very long time ago now, but do you remember how the world was gripped by Olympics and Paralympics mania over the summer? I wonder how many of you were glued to your TV screens watching the events in Paris. At the very least, I hope lots of you tuned in to watch Old Wellensian Annie Campbell-Orde secure a bronze medal as part of the GB Women's Eight Rowing Team.

So exciting and all-encompassing are the Games when they happen, that it can often feel like quite a come-down or even an anti-climax when the closing ceremonies have taken place and the Games are declared over for another four years.

And that's just the feeling we as spectators have. Imagine what it must feel like to be one of the competing athletes. For years their preparations and the prospect of competing at the Games has consumed their lives, hopes, dreams and fears daily. And then, just like that, it's all over. The razmataz fades and the Olympic Torch moves on. And what do those who have twisted every sinew - literally - do now?

The so-called post-Olympic blues or slump is a well-known phenomenon. Over the years, even the biggest sporting stars have spoken about depression and anxiety setting in in the aftermath of the Games. They speak of a sense of loss of purpose, not knowing what to do with themselves, and a realisation that - no matter how successful they were or how many medals they did or didn't win - on their return home nothing has fundamentally changed.

I listened to an interview about this on Radio 4's PM programme on the evening of GCSE Results Day back in August. Adam Burgess, a canoeist for Team GB who won a silver in Paris, was being interviewed. He spoke about his own experience of the euphoria draining away on his return to home and normality. He spoke about how he and his fellow Team GB members had been encouraged by experts even before the Games had started to think about how they were going to manage when they had finished, and of the need to have a plan in place to manage those inevitable 'post-Olympic blues'.

And during that interview he said something which really resonated with me. He said that fundamentally he and his fellow athletes needed, and I quote: "to be happy in ourselves as individuals away from the sport, first". He went on to refer to a scene in the 1990s film 'Cool Runnings' which I am sure many of you will have seen - a film about a Jamaican bobsleigh team competing in the 1988 Winter Olympics. He mentioned a scene where one of the

athletes asks his coach, "How will I know if I'm enough when I'm stood on that podium?" And his coach responds, "You'll know because if you're not enough without the medal, you'll never be enough with it."

In our reading this morning we heard the story of the Transfiguration - a moment in Jesus' life recorded by three of the four Gospel writers. We are told that he ascended to the top of a mountain and while there seems to be transformed as if into light. Over the centuries many people have tried to interpret what this might all have meant or symbolised. Some see it as a pivotal moment where human nature meets God, with Jesus as the connecting point, acting as the bridge between heaven and earth. Others have interpreted it as being about God assigning to Jesus a special honour and exalting him as ruler and judge above all other powers in creation. And yet others consider Jesus's body being transformed into light as being a preview of his glorified body following his resurrection. Whatever the purpose of the event on the mountain, it's clear it was a pretty climactic moment. One might be tempted to consider it the pinnacle of his achievement or experience. But what happens next? Firstly, Jesus told his closest friends who witnessed the event not to tell anyone - and there's a whole other sermon in why that might be. And secondly, in what for me is one of the most significant points of the story - Jesus came down from the mountain - he left this extraordinary experience behind him, and returned to life as normal. After what would, for the rest of us, have been a life-changing experience, Jesus returns home as if nothing had happened.

Many of you will have climbed mountains in your time - the Alps, the Pyrenees, Snowdonia, Ben Nevis, even Mount Everest. You will know, then, just how amazing being at the top of a mountain is - the feeling of looking down on the world, experiencing breath-taking views and being elated by your sense of accomplishment as well as the opportunity to enjoy a different perspective.

But those feelings have to come to an end when you turn around and come back down the mountain. No matter how beautiful and awe-inspiring being at the top of a mountain is, it's not realistic, sensible or even safe to stay at the top indefinitely. We all have to eventually come back down to earth and get on with our normal lives.

There's a metaphor for us more generally, there, I think. Just like the Olympic athletes, we will all have moments of supreme elation and achievement. We will all have really special moments. But they are the exception, not the norm. We have to find ways of living comfortably and contentedly with the mundane and the every day and not to reserve our elation for the exceptional times only. To know that we are enough even without a medal.

That's not to say we shouldn't all strive for moments of extreme success and achievement - and goodness knows just how many of those moments you as a School enjoy on a weekly basis. But those moments are, of course, just the tip of the mountain. They are isolated moments of exceptional achievement in amongst what is normal and ordinary. And so we need not only to keep things in perspective but also to find ways of getting a sense of fulfilment from the ordinary.

There are all sorts of ways we can do this, and there is no single route to such fulfilment. But as members of Wells Cathedral School, I'd like to suggest that if we live by our Core Values of Creativity, Aspiration, Responsibility and Endeavour, then that's as sure a way as

any to find fulfilment in the everyday as much as in the exceptional. Of course, I hope that we as a School instil many more important values than our stated core ones. But if we can live imaginative and innovative lives (Creativity), where we set ambitious goals and aim always to find the positive in things (Aspiration), alongside taking ownership for our own lives and showing respect for others (Responsibility) while striving to do our best at all times and showing grit in everything we do (Endeavour), then that strikes me as being a pretty sure-fire way of making the most of our ordinary lives and elevating even the most mundane of experiences.

So over the next few Mondays here in the Cathedral, our speakers are going to reflect on each of our Core Values in turn, in order to help us all consider how we might live out our School values even more effectively. Because as the 17th century French mathematician, inventor and philosopher Pascal said: "Small minds are concerned with the extraordinary; great minds with the ordinary". Something a more recent well-known figure, Ricky Gervais no less, also believes in, stating: "To make the ordinary extraordinary is so much better than starting with the extraordinary."

So as we start this new academic year, let's use the tools we all have at our disposal to recognise that we can make those moments when we aren't at the top of the mountain just as fulfilling and enriching as if we were 'on top of the world'. And let's recommit ourselves to living by our CARE values so that we can achieve just that.