

Accepting others: We Meet in Harmony

Assembly by Mr Martin Ashton, Deputy Head (Pastoral), June 2025

It is a privilege every time I have the opportunity to speak in this wonderful building. Because of its architectural beauty, its historical significance and its significance to us as a school. It is a place that I have grown over many years to respect and learn from. I wonder if we allow ourselves the freedom to be changed by, and in, this building.

With no microphone I'll keep this short both for my voice and for your ears.

It's the Last Monday morning Cathedral service of the year and I can't think of a better subject to close the series than that of **accepting others for who they are**.

This is a subject of pervading importance in our lives, in our relationships, in our world and in our School.

A subject we've chosen to focus on through Pride month.

Let's allow ourselves to be healthily challenged this morning. Do we really treat each other and our neighbour with equal levels of respect, kindness and acceptance? Regardless of rank, status and popularity? Regardless of interests, talents and personalities? Regardless of where we're from, what we look like, how our brains are wired? Regardless of sexuality, gender, the colour of our skin?

And as Mrs Gray brought to our attention last week when she spoke about unconscious bias, Are we prepared to unroot any prejudice we've picked up along the way that makes us think or act towards others in a way that consciously or unconsciously puts them, or categories of them, in a restricting or subjugating place?

Perhaps it all starts with accepting who **we** are. Perhaps if we all felt valued, accepted and loved ourselves, then it would be simpler to reflect that acceptance back in the way we see other people, the way we treat other people.

I'm currently reading a book, published recently and released for general sale last week entitled 'The Greatest Story Ever Told' and by the time the last page has been turned it's hard to refute that. I'll give you a clue or two - its biographical and the hero of the book lived 2025 years ago.

We've all heard the stories, plural, the water into wine, the blind man healed, the loaves and fishes etc.

But what about the story, his story. From start to finish, coherently plotted and narrated.

You might be more surprised to know that this book was written by Bear Grylls – generally associated with his days as a soldier with the SAS, scaling Everest and hosting more adventure shows worldwide than anyone in history – and yet he admits that writing this book has been the single most important and exciting adventure of his life.

This dramatised version of the life of Jesus is at times beautiful and harrowing, the tale of an impoverished child born into the ruthlessness of the first century Roman Empire. He grew up to become a renegade teacher and at the age of 33 was brutally killed because he was not accepted by the authorities of the time.

But who changed the world forever.

How did Jesus show the way to accept everyone and all of us?

By loving the easiest people to hate, by drawing alongside the least popular, the most shunned.

When others turned their backs on immoral and greedy tax collectors he drew alongside them and showed them there was a better way. He transformed them from the inside out. When lepers and those riddled with disease were ostracised, he moved amongst them. He challenged social norms by eating with those no one else would eat with. He challenged the rich and the powerful to have a social conscience and share what they had, he championed the poor and lowly – he had no interest in status.

And he expected nothing in return.

And closer to home, you and I have the ability and the power to be a force for good in a world that needs peacemakers and people to stand in the gaps, people to stand up for justice and bring people together.

In 1992 Mamokete Mongale, a girl from Soweto in South Africa, was given a scholarship so that she could attend this School. There was no way her family would have been able to afford the fees. But she was incredibly determined and talented.

Soweto was created in the 1930s when the South African government separated those with white coloured skin from those with those with black coloured skin and so Soweto became a segregated township – and the largest city for those with black skin in South Africa. There were riots and significant loss of life due to civil unrest during the apartheid regime over several decades – at their peak when Mamokete was a child growing up in the 1970s and 1980s.

And so it was from this backdrop of poverty and racial discrimination that Mamokete came to this School.

She was by all accounts an inspirational personality and was always prepared to express her views and challenge any form of injustice or inequality.

Shortly after taking her A levels, she tragically died from unknown causes on her return journey home in 1994. She would have been about the same age as me and I would have loved to have met her.

It is because of her independent thinking, her honesty and her lively determination to become part of a new environment that Mamokete is remembered by the School some 30 years later. A Creative Arts competition was established in her memory as a tribute to her courage and vibrant spirit - to this day we invite Years 7-9 to write poetry, produce a piece of artwork or compose a piece of music.

We've had some wonderful entries again this year. Well done and thank you to those of you who did so and I hope this address inspires some of you in Years 7 and 8 to enter next year.

I've asked Freya W, who wrote a beautiful poem as her entry, entitled, 'We Meet in Harmony' - to conclude this part of the service for us:

We Meet in Harmony

They say we're all one human race,
But why do some still judge by face?
Why does skin decide your fate,
Who you fear, or love, or hate?

In class we sit side by side,
But some still feel the need to hide-
Their hair, their names, the truth inside,
Because the world won't let it slide

I hear the jokes, I see the stares,
And wonder if they even care.
The ones they joke about just smile,
But I can see it hurts a while.

History books try to explain
Why there is still so much pain-
From chains, to walls, to begging knees,
To people crying, "Let us breathe."

Some think racism's in the past,
But the truth is, it still lasts.
It hides in habits we've outgrown,
In things we've built but never known.

I won't pretend to have it solved,
There's way too much still unresolved.
But I believe in trying hard,
In choosing peace and healing scars.

It starts with listening, for real,
Not just feeling but choosing to heal.
It's calling out what's wrong, not fake,
Even if your voice might shake.

It's quiet strength when no one cheers,
It's steady hands that fight through fears.
It's in the tiny things we do,
Like learning names and seeing you

I dream of streets where kids can play
And not be judged by shades of grey.
Where no one hears, "You don't belong."
Where every culture sings their song.

So maybe I'm still young and small,
But even pebbles start a wall.
And if enough of us all try,
We'll make a difference, you and I.

Different hearts, one steady beat.
Harmony is when we meet.