

# Strength in Community

Assembly by Mr Alastair Tighe, Head Master, June 2026

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Of the many pleasures and privileges I have enjoyed during the last eight years as Head Master, one of the greatest has been taking my dog out for his evening pee. Let me explain.

Most nights, between 10 and 11 pm, I leave my house next door to Haversham and walk my spaniel, Nimrod, down New Street, past Mullins and Ritchie, through the Great West Gate and onto Cathedral Green. There, every evening, I am greeted by one of the most inspiring views in Europe: the great West Front of Wells Cathedral.

The view is never the same. Whether beneath a clear, starlit sky, through mist or rain, in the darkness of January or the lingering light of June, it still takes my breath away, just as it has done for countless people over the last eight centuries.

As Nimrod stretches his legs around the Green, I often think of the statues emerging from the shadows as I approach. They remind me of the words about the old woman from Feed the Birds in 'Mary Poppins': "All around the cathedral the saints and apostles look down as she sells her wares. Although you can't see them, you know they are smiling each time someone shows that he cares."

Our Cathedral's West Front is one of the masterpieces of medieval Europe. Standing over 100 feet high and almost 150 feet wide, it contains one of the largest surviving collections of medieval statuary on the continent. Of the original 400 statues, nearly 300 remain. In the Middle Ages they would have been brightly painted, forming a vast 3D storyboard for a largely illiterate population.

A few years ago, I had the privilege of climbing the restoration scaffolding to see these statues face to face. Up close, traces of the original paint amazingly still survive in sheltered corners protected from 800 years worth of rain and wind.

But the West Front was designed to be far more than beautiful. Beginning with knights, bishops, kings and queens at the lower levels, rising through saints, angels and apostles, and culminating in Christ in Majesty at the summit, it presents a vision of an ordered society in which every individual has a place within a greater whole.

That vision echoes the words of St Paul we've just heard read (1 Cor 12.12-26): "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body." Unity does not require uniformity. Every member has a different role, but each contributes to the flourishing of the whole. If one part suffers, every part suffers; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices.

The same is true of Wells Cathedral School.

Each of us brings different gifts, personalities and ambitions. Yet we also belong to this School. We fulfil different roles, but together we form a community strengthened by the contribution of every one of its members.

That is why I have always valued our weekly gatherings in this Cathedral. They are far more than a timetable fixture. They allow us to pause, reflect on life's deeper questions and remind ourselves of the values that bind us together. Meeting beneath this magnificent Nave roof, adjacent to a West Front that has symbolised an ordered and connected society for eight centuries, makes these moments particularly special.

As you sit here this morning, think of the generations who have sat where you are now. Thousands of Wellensians have gathered in this place over more than a thousand years. They came here, as we do today, to reflect, to learn and to be part of something larger than themselves.

Some of you occasionally wonder why we come to the Cathedral as part of School life. My answer is simple: because these moments matter.

As Mrs Mahon reminded us last week, these moments give us time and space in the present. Inspired by word, music and architecture, they strengthen our sense of belonging. They connect us with those who came before us and remind us of our responsibility to those who will come after us. They encourage us to ask not only how we are developing as individuals, but also how our actions strengthen—or weaken—the communities to which we belong.

Looking beyond ourselves is one of the great sources of wisdom. It cultivates humility by reminding us that our lives are shaped by history, by other people and by truths greater than our own immediate ambitions. Whether we seek meaning through faith, philosophy or science, the search for purpose always asks us to lift our gaze beyond ourselves.

None of us becomes the person we are in isolation. We are formed by those who have gone before us and by those alongside whom we live and work.

In my first Cathedral address after arriving here in 2018, I spoke about our School motto, "Be who you are", and suggested being who you are should never mean remaining as you are. We are called continually to grow, to discover ourselves afresh and to become the very best versions of ourselves, the best we can be.

And we cannot do that alone.

We realise our fullest potential through the encouragement, challenge, wisdom and kindness of others. That is why the proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," remains so powerful. In truth, it takes a community to form every one of us.

As I come towards the end of my time here, I am increasingly aware of how much I have been shaped by all of you. I have been enriched, challenged and inspired by colleagues, pupils and parents alike. Like anyone, I have sometimes got things right and sometimes got things wrong, but I remain deeply grateful for everything you have taught me.

Living well in community is never easy. It requires us to listen carefully, being open to different perspectives and compromises, and recognising that the common good will not always coincide with our individual preferences. Yet that is precisely what community asks of us.

I have also become ever more conscious that each of us is only a small part of something much larger. There is no "I" in team, as the saying goes. The Romans expressed the same idea through the symbol of the fasces—a bundle of wooden rods bound tightly together. Individually, each rod could easily be broken; together they became immensely strong. It remains a powerful image of the truth that unity gives strength.

That is why gathering here matters.

This Cathedral is itself a vision in stone of a society held together by shared purpose. Our assembling here reminds us that we belong to one another. Amid the busyness of School life, it is important to pause and ask not only how we are flourishing as individuals, but how we are helping others to flourish too and what it means to live well together.

Given our history and founding purpose, it is entirely fitting that we do so within the context of Christian worship. At the same time, one of the great strengths of this School is the diversity of beliefs and perspectives represented within it. We do not all think alike, nor should we. Yet whatever our personal convictions, surely we can all recognise the enduring ethical wisdom of Christ's command to "love your neighbour as yourself."

To treat others as we ourselves wish to be treated is one of humanity's deepest moral insights. It lies at the heart of every healthy family, every successful school and every flourishing society.

So let me finish where I began: on one of those late evening walks across Cathedral Green.

As I stand before the West Front and look upwards, I am reminded almost daily of my own smallness in the presence of such beauty, craftsmanship and vision. My eye is drawn steadily upwards through the ranks of statues until it finally rests on Christ in Majesty at the summit.

He is depicted watching over the city, one hand open and extended downwards in welcome and peace, the other raised in blessing. The fingers on this hand point upwards, and immediately above him you notice the architects have cunningly placed a spire, drawing the eye higher still. It was a deliberate artistic decision, inviting every viewer to look beyond their own limitations towards something greater.

Whether or not you share the Christian faith, I think that invitation remains profoundly important. We live in an age that often encourages us to look inwards—to define ourselves by our ambitions, opinions and desires. Yet the wisdom embodied in this place suggests something different: that fulfilment comes through belonging, serving and lifting our gaze beyond ourselves.

For Christians, that ultimate horizon is God. For others, it may be found through philosophy, the pursuit of truth or the service of humanity. Whatever path we follow, the challenge is the same: to recognise that life's deepest meaning is rarely found by looking only within ourselves.

My hope for every one of you is that, long after you leave Wells, you will remember what this Cathedral and School has quietly taught generation after generation: that humility is stronger than pride; that community is richer than individualism; that compassion matters more than success alone; and that our greatest achievements are rarely those we accomplish by ourselves, but those we achieve together.