

“Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God”

(Ecclesiastes 5. 1)

Right! Where did that come from? “*Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God*”? How bizarre! And yet, every single one of you passed under those very words when you came into this church tonight. They are the words written above the lintel of the inner door of the narthex at the main entrance of the church. I bet that none of you even noticed that there was anything written above your heads, let alone what was written there. Of course not! In part, because you were watching your feet as you came in to make sure that you didn’t fall on your faces; in part, because you were coming in from a glorious parade in all of the splendour of your collective array on a lovely evening in May.

But don’t be alarmed. I can reasonably assure you that hundreds and thousands who have passed through these doors over the century and more that this building has been here have not noticed those words either, let alone understood what they mean. Until, that is, they were pointed out to them.

And yet, that is just the point. There are things which have to be pointed out to us, things that we would not notice otherwise, things that we can only begin to understand because they have been made known to us. What does it all come down to? Well, something which you have heard repeatedly, especially in this week of exquisite and endless drill, drill, drill and more drill, this week of muck and mud, of rain and pain, of wind and cold, this week of ever-changing routines and heightened expectations, this week of the panic and the manic cramming for exams, this week of the beginning of IB examinations, this week in which you have been told countless times and in numerous ways, “*Pay attention*”! Well, aren’t we having fun yet?

Dante, the great medieval poet and theologian, puts it a little more kindly and yet more pointedly. “*Guarda e escolta*”, the pilgrim poet is told. “*Look and listen!*” It captures succinctly the repeated exhortation in the Scriptures, especially of the Old Testament – “*Hear, O Israel*”. In other words, sit up and listen. Hearing and seeing are more than just two of our physical senses; they are also the intellectual senses of the understanding. We commonly say to someone with whom we are in conversation, “*I see what you mean*” and “*I hear you*” meaning that we understand.

But look and listen to what? For Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, it is to the pageant of revelation which gathers up all of the images of scripture into a sacramental parade uniting our humanity with God, a parade of images which captures the good and the bad about ourselves and, more significantly, the redemption of ourselves and our desires to make us “*pure and prepared to leap up to the stars*”.

In a way, it is what we do at King’s-Edgehill in Chapel and in this service. We sit and listen, look and think about the remarkable images pointed out to us in

the Scriptures. We endeavour to engage those images and ideas in relation to the confusions of our world and day and the tempests within our own hearts and souls. We are constantly being challenged to make connections, for such is the work of the intellect. We are constantly being told to pay attention because there is something to be learned, something to be understood, something which calls us out of ourselves and into something which is bigger than ourselves.

The script above the door comes from the most philosophical of the books of that collection of books we call the Bible, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. It continues, “*be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they consider not that they do evil*”. Taken as a whole, then, the meaning is clear. “*Keep thy foot*” has to do with paying attention in a thoughtful and thinking way to the purpose of this place, to the meaning of this service and, by extension, to the larger purpose of the educational project of this school. Religion is not an add-on to life or merely a relic of tradition at King’s-Edgehill School. It is central to education and when it is left out of the equation, we are all the poorer for it; indeed, we betray the very roots and principles of our educational institutions, let alone the institutions of family, church and state, when we forget the spiritual ideals which inform and inhabit them, ideals which continue to challenge them and us.

Simply left to ourselves we do nothing, I am afraid, other than to wreak havoc upon ourselves and others. Even our best intentions are flawed both in concept and in action. To be aware of this is good news if we will allow ourselves to be open to the spiritual and moral truths which hold us accountable to what is bigger than ourselves and yet in which we find the truth of ourselves. Education, after all, is about being led out of ourselves and into a wider world of ideas, ideas which we then have to will and make our own. Those ideas and principles have to be pointed out to us so that we may discover the way of their truth in us.

It requires paying attention. You have been through a whirlwind week of remarkable intensity – going madly all about in all directions, it might seem, from one thing to another, with constant changes to the regular order of your week and day.

You have had to *keep your feet* in the midst of the scrum lest you get kicked in the head – or even worse, receive a kick in the hinder parts from Mr. MacDonald, if not Mr. Shaw, whose foot is likely to leave a somewhat larger imprint, if you don’t pay attention.

You have had to *keep your feet* in the drill of this week lest you risk the wrath of Major Miles – a sweet pussy-cat really but with the roar of a lion – or the wrath of the Medina’s squared or the thunderous wrath of Darcy Walsh ever vigilant on the warpath against delinquency, “*Get you to where you belong, now!*”, a wrath which makes the wrath of God look like sweet music the angels sang.

You have had to *keep your feet* to the beat of the Maestro's baton in a wonderful medley of tunes, from the macarena to a soupçon of airs, blues, and Broadway tunes; in short, just about everything and, of course, "*all that jazz*".

You have had to *keep your feet* in attending to Mr. Dick's rigorous explanations of the sex-life of tadpoles in the ponds of King's-Edgehill, now a real-life expert having begotten two tadpoles of his own. We may wonder what is in the water at King's-Edgehill, what with two pairs of twins – first the Lakes and now Mr. Dick and his wife! What might that portend for Ms. Walzak and her matrimonial intentions or, for that matter, Mr. MacDonald's? Quintuplets? We may note, in passing, that while fertility rates are down in the nation as a whole, this year alone at King's, the fertility rate among the faculty has increased 400% with the births of Zoë, Gabriella, and Liam and David.

You have had to *keep your feet* in chapel as the Chaplain tries without success to play with his right hand and sing from the left side of his brain. Fiona and Erica where were you when I needed you?

You have had to *keep your feet* at Wednesday Word as the Headmaster explains in a uniquely Cornish version of iambic pentameter yet another word of Latinate polysyllabic construction, absolutely essential if you entertain any hope of becoming a headmaster yourself someday, and good for little else.

You have had to *keep your feet* tonight not just in coming in the door but in this corporate service, singing lustily about "*the mercy of God [that] endureth forever*", as "*he slew mighty kings*", "*Sihon, King of the Amorites*" and "*Og, the King of Bashan/for his mercy endureth forever*", nothing meek and mild, *gentle-Jesus-come-and-squeeze-us*, about any of that!

But why are you doing this? So you may have wondered as you stood out in the heat of the sun or out in the cold, cold wind of yesterday. (The Cadet Inspection, we should have warned you, always comes with a Winter Storm Advisory. This is the Maritimes, after all.) But what possible practical purpose can any of this stuff really serve? Cold weather training for Canada's expeditionary force to reclaim sovereignty over our arctic islands against the threat of Danish invasion? Marching in the heat of last week training for Canada's expeditionary force to acquire the Turks and Caicos Islands as Canada's real "*ocean playground*", one with warm water? Well, of course! You didn't think those new pith helmets were just for show, did you? Or, perhaps, at the very least, you can be a traffic cop in Trinidad.

But no. All the things that you have been involved in throughout this week of intensity are part and parcel of the pattern of instruction belonging to the educational purpose and intent of King's-Edgehill School. And none of them are easily reducible to any immediate practical use because they all belong to

something much more radical and much more profound, namely to *the formation of character*; in short, to *the education of the whole person, mind, soul and body*.

Now you may wonder what kind of school it is to which your parents have sent you, where boys wear skirts and girls play with guns, but think about it. *Your feelings are not the primary concern*. Nor can they be. Who in his right mind wants to stand out in the bone-chilling wind with knees knocking wearing an itchy wool skirt, ribs constrained by a wool tunic tighter than a whale-bone corset, and be told where and when to move, unless, that is, you are a Scot?

But you did. Why? Because you have learned some important lessons, ones which I hope will stay with you. *You have learned that things worth doing and worth doing well are not measured by your feelings*. You have willed to enter into something that is bigger than yourself, and, paradoxically, that is better for yourself. An education that is about the formation of character is actually counter-culture. What you have learned is *the dignity of duty*, a sense of obligation to a collective effort, to a community of persons united in a common task and aware of one another and the larger demands of our humanity.

Jonathan Sacks, the chief-rabbi of Great Britain, observes that the twentieth century suffered a fatal blow *"by the collapse of moral language, the disappearance of 'I ought' and its replacement by 'I want', 'I choose', 'I feel'"*. As he points out, *"obligations can be debated. Wants, choices and feelings can only be satisfied or frustrated"*. You have learned something about duty, a rather old-fashioned word which is almost anathema in the self-absorbed egotism of the contemporary culture of extended adolescence.

The dignity of duty leads to another lesson. You have learned *the dignity of responsibility*, accepting ownership of the specific tasks which have been assigned to you. Then there is *the dignity of discipline*, the dignity of learning itself, in myriads of ways, each requiring your attention. And finally, there is the *dignity of service*, the dignity of putting the needs of others before your own wants and feelings, the dignity of giving rather than receiving.

These are all, dare I say, the counter-culture lessons of the educational programme at King's-Edgehill School. Things have been asked of you, required of you and demanded of you, and you have responded magnificently and with grace and dignity. You have withstood the tendencies of the culture to whine and whimper, to whinge and pout when things get tough and difficult and even when they don't; in short, you have not demanded that you be molly-coddled, cosseted and stroked. You have entered into what has been required of you and in so doing you have made these things your own. We are all, I think, the better for it.

What bestows dignity upon duty, responsibility, discipline and service? Simply put, the praise and worship of God. *"God is your praise"* as we heard in the lesson

which Sujana read from The Book of Deuteronomy. There we learn what God requires of us, that is to say, our primary duty; namely to “*fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep his commandments*”. The will and purpose of God underlies the whole created order and every human endeavour that is worth doing. The ethical dimension of this lesson underscores the point that this is not something egotistical and self-serving. For “*God loves the sojourner*”, the wandering stranger, “*therefore you shall love the sojourner*”, the wandering stranger in your midst. We have obligations and duties towards one another, both neighbour and stranger. The dignity of duty is rooted in our duty to God, for we, too, were sojourners, wanderers and strangers to the word and will of God, especially when we fail to *keep our feet*.

The theme of that lesson becomes the last word of that most philosophical book of the Bible, Ecclesiastes. “*Fear God, and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man*”. To fear God is to hold him in awe and wonder. Last words are what we heard from Dale who, perhaps, would like to think he has the last word, but in this case he read from the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, The Book of the Revelation of St. John the Divine. What is the last word? “*Worship God*”. That is the meaning of the entire last chapter.

Begin with God and end with God. Everthing is contained by that. That beginning and ending is signified in Jesus Christ who says “*I am the Alpha and the Omega*”, the beginning and the end. *Guarda e ascolta*, look and listen. Look up, way up, and in the roof beams of this church you will see the Alpha and the Omega – the letter Alpha “A”, and the last letter of the Greek alphabet, the letter Omega, which looks like a three-quarter circle with turned out feet. *You are embraced within the Alpha and the Omega*. It is an image of our lives in prayer and praise, in the worship of the One who does not need our worship and yet alone is worthy of it. Pay attention and, then, you will see what you can learn.

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*Fr. David Curry
Choral Evensong
KES Cadet Corps
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