

“God has gone up with a merry noise”

“May is Mary’s month”, the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins observes and wonders *“why fasten that upon her”?* And well we might wonder, too, for what is May in the Maritimes but mud and rain, sun and wind, promises of warmth and the clinging, chilling traces of winter still present not past; in short, predictably unpredictable? Perhaps for us, May *“is the cruelest month of all.”* And what a week we have had of it! A week of everything! A week of *“hailstones and coals of fire”,* we might say, the literal and the metaphorical, for we are greatly blessed in spite of all our recalcitrance and our resistance, our complaining and our reluctance. The blessing that is the counter to it all is precisely this week of remarkable intensity. The week from Hell, you might say, and I have said it, too, but no, not really. It has been positively heavenly! The week of Heaven, let us say!

“God has gone up with a merry noise”, the psalmist says, *“the Lord with the sound of the trumpet”,* speaking about the God of Israel as the king of all creation. In the Christian understanding that kingship is made visible in the paradox and wonder of Christ *crucified and dead, and Christ risen and ascended; in short, the cross and the glory.*

We meet in the Ascension of Christ. This is *The Sunday after Ascension.* The Ascension marks the culmination of the resurrection and the celebration of *the homecoming of the Son to the Father* having accomplished *“the will of the one who sent [him]”.* It is a time of great rejoicing, a time of great glory. *“God has gone up”,* the Son has returned to the Father. And what that means for us is truly profound. It means that we have a place with God. *“I go”,* he says *“to prepare a place for you ... that where I am, there you may be also.”* We have an end, a purpose for our being and our living.

King’s-Edgehill School is the place of your education. But what is the purpose or end of that education? There are two kinds of problems about education, the educator and philosopher Neil Postman suggests, the one is *an engineering problem,* the other is *a metaphysical problem.* The first concerns the practical and the pragmatic, the *how-to* kinds of questions. The second concerns the end for which things are done, the *what-for* kinds of questions. And if we are not thinking constantly about the *what-for,* that is to say, the end for which we are doing what we are doing, then, all our doings are really of little worth and may even become quite deadly and destructive. Without attention to the end or purpose of education, the great endeavours of this week quickly dissolve into a series of competing side-shows or a chorus of complaints. We lose sight of ourselves and the nature of the common enterprise belonging to the purpose of the School and this place.

In a way, the whole educational year and purpose of the school is concentrated into this week, into this weekend, and even into this service. Think about it.

What have you had to do during this week of the *longue durée*, this never-ending week? Simply everything and everything all at once and all together.

It requires great patience, complete commitment, and careful attention. Who would have ever thought that it takes so much attention to put one foot in front of another, and then, to do it again and again! And yet, to do that together with one another is a real discipline of the mind, the body and the spirit. *Such things do not just happen.*

For that reason there have been cadets and cadets and more cadets culminating in a wonderful Sunset Ceremony on a calm and lovely night – what a blessing! – with the drums and the pipes echoing off the walls of the new Athletic complex. There was a most splendid Cadet Inspection and Awards Ceremony on a Saturday that was grey and cool but not too cold and not too damp. What a blessing! I didn't hear your knees knocking or your teeth chattering this year! Nor was medical intervention needed for lips frozen to the brass wind instruments; it was required instead for the fingers of Major Miles.

There was the *Spring Fling*, a marvelous instrumental *tour de force* of talent and expertise that is the fruit of much training and practice, discipline and attention to the baton of Maestro "Smitty", Mr. Jeff Smith, as well as attention to one another. *Such things do not just happen.*

There were choir rehearsals leading up to this service, learning to sing things ancient and new, even things composed for the choir by Mr. Owen Stephens, organist and choir director of our junior and senior choirs. And what great concentration and attention, commitment and effort it takes to connect words and music, whether it is the music of William Byrd, organist and composer at the Chapel Royal of Queen Elizabeth the First, or Gregorian chant, the core music of God's story for the western church for almost fifteen hundred years. Just consider the richness and the scope of the tradition of which you are a part. *Such things do not just happen.*

There were sports and sports and more sports. There are our track-and-field athletes in high performance training mode, running like cheetahs, leaping like gazelles and throwing like, here, I am afraid, metaphor falters and fails, Neanderthals won't quite work, will it? But in any event, doing it all with grace and strength, with skill and determination, under the scrutiny and guidance of Mr. Guy Payne, himself an athlete of distinction and ability, now of somewhat older vintage, mind you, but like good wine, bottled to perfection for you to enjoy the fruits of his labours as coach along with Mr. Derek Bouwman, Ms. Elaine Curran and Ms. Esther Mosher, the young, the not-so-young, and the not-so-old, who are there to inspire you, prod you and, literally, keep you on track. And if Ms. Mosher can't do that – it is heresy even to think that she can't – then Rupert will be at your heels helping you to attend to the discipline that leads to great accomplishments. *Such things do not just happen.*

There is the dream team under the coaching genii of our very own Canadian idol wannabe Mr. Ries "I have a dream" Van Beek and the equally irrepressible Mr. Frank "I'm a poet and I didn't even know it" Boothroyd with two, count'em, two wins and one of them in this week of heaven. Field of dreams! Isn't it heavenly? But Mr. Van Beek and his wife's real dream come true is surely their baby daughter Lily, a blessing for them and for the school. Throwing and catching, hitting and running takes discipline and attention, strategy and skill, not altogether unlike child-rearing. *Such things do not just happen.*

Then there is rugby, both the girls and the guys. What a spectacle! Whether it is the first fifteen or the second fifteen or the fifteen (or is it fifty?) coaches, there is always a scrum to be seen whether on the sidelines or on the pitch. There is glory in the muck of the ruck, in the line-out and the run but only by paying attention to the flow of the game which goes forwards, of course, only by going backwards. This game, I remind you, is courtesy of the English. Once again, it takes "*strength of conviction*" (IB English students and Mr. Kennedy please note the literary references to Margaret Laurence, both *The Stone Angel* and *The Diviners*, the exam is tomorrow). It takes skill and attention to try and to try and to try again and again and again.

Please remember a try is not an attempt, it is not an *essaie*, comme les *Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, as Monsieur Medina can explain; it is to have succeeded. This, too, is courtesy of the English. *Knock on* is a penalty not a cry of encouragement. It means stop right now and do not go on. The other fellas or gals get the ball. Rugby is, however, unmistakably poetry in motion with full glottal stops upon impact and concluding always with a spirited rendition of "*I wish I were in Sherbrooke now...a broken man on a Halifax pier, the last of Barrett's privateers*", or at least, the King's privateers, those who bear letters of marque. Ask Mr. Naugler or read Patrick O'Brien. We are, after all, a private school. Who says that arts and sports do not connect? Mere poverty of imagination. It goes without saying that *such things do not just happen.*

"*And what more shall I say? For time would fail me*" as *The Letter to the Hebrews* puts it, to talk of other sports such as the *badmintistas* who under the direction and guidance of Mr. Coxon and Mr. Hollett have succeeded in battering birds admirably. About *Tae Kwon Do*, under the skill and care of Mr. Fidel Castro, it would be prudent, if not safer, to remain silent, lest I get a gracious kick in the hinder parts. But suffice to say that these and other sports contribute to a wonderful display of discipline and attention, of talent and virtuosity. *Such things do not just happen.*

Today marks, as well, VE day, *Victory in Europe*, and how appropriate that this should be the week, the heavenly week, of the sparing of wits, learning and memory about the War in the *Call to Remembrance* contests in the Province of Nova Scotia. Under the guidance of Mr. Kevin Lakes and with a contingent of

contestants and their personal trainers, the King's-Edgehill *Call to Remembrance* team placed third in the Province. *Such things do not just happen.*

But in the arena of intellectual endeavour, there is little to compare with the intensity and the stress of students writing their *International Baccalaureate* examinations. It began in this heavenly week of endeavour and concentration, attention and academic commitment to excellence. What could be more heavenly? Yet again, *such things do not just happen.*

And now, here we are in this place and in the meaning of this service in a kind of culmination of the great variety and greater unity of these events belonging to the quality of your life at King's-Edgehill and in the purpose of its educational quest. In a way, the whole of the year and the whole life of the school are distilled, like good scotch, into the glory of this week – it doesn't get much better than this. And *such things do not just happen.*

And yet, if I were to ask you in the various moments of this week whether you liked what you were doing and whether this was fun, I know, and you know what you would say and often did say. *No.* In the moment, things are not always great fun. Cadets, Choir, Band, Classes, Chapel, Exams, even Sports in the drudgery of training, can these be said to be fun? Not in the moment. Be honest. And yet, that is the point, that somehow you have been moved to persevere in spite of yourselves, in spite of the hell of the moment, as it were, to stick with it. The glory comes after. The glory comes through the moment and not simply in the moment.

What is the point of all this? Many of you have asked in exasperation and annoyance and some of you have concluded that all of the things that have been demanded of you this week are of no practical worth. What's the use of this? You have said. And you know, you are absolutely right. Nothing of what belongs to this week of heaven is of any practical worth. But guess what, it is not about the practical! These things are not about the *how-to* of what we think we want to do. They are all about the things of moral, spiritual and intellectual worth, the *what-for* kinds of questions belonging to the end and purpose of education. Ultimately, that is why we are here.

And how does it happen? Because of people who care enough to cry with you, be with you, argue with you, be in your face with you, persist in demanding that this is what you will do; people who refuse to molly-coddle you, pamper you, or smother you with condescension and patronizing care, people who stand up to the pusillanimous pouting of pubescent youth (that is a series of headmaster-type words, two of which are of Latinate origin and one that is Old English), people who persist in helping you grow up, day in and day out. They are your teachers. As Robertson Davies observes about private schools, "*they can accommodate a few cultured madmen on the staff without having to offer explanations*".

I know. You are thirteen going on thirty. You are eighteen going on five. You are sixteen going on sixteen. You know everything. Adults know nothing. You are right. The difference, perhaps, is that we know that we do not know and that is wisdom. Why don't adults listen, you complain? But they do. They nod sagaciously to what you say and then tell you gently, firmly, forcibly, whatever, to tie up your shoe-laces and straighten your tie, suck it up and get on with it, now. Because, mad as we are, no doubt, we do care.

On your behalf, if I may be so bold, I salute my fellow colleagues for their commitment and dedication to the education of the whole person, mind, body and spirit, to the formation of character through the crucible of challenges and commitments. There are the ideals of gentleness and learning, of courtesy and *humanitas*, of dignity and respect, of genuine toleration and forbearance in the quest for truth and understanding which cannot be reduced to the practical and the pragmatic. The moral, intellectual and spiritual principles belonging to the end of education of the school shape the practical without being collapsed into it.

I would like especially to salute Ms. Melody Hopkins whose energy and goodwill have contributed so much to the dynamic of the boarding community. We shall miss the melody of her charm and her infectious but unmelodious laughter as she journeys to the land of spices, to Thailand.

It takes *strength of conviction* to hold to the things of principle and not give into the pressures of expediency, to the idolatry of the practical and to the tyranny of the experiential. Mistakes get made of course, by all of us. At issue is whether anything is learned from our mistakes, the mistakes of willfulness and thoughtlessness that so often result in the sad tragedies of accident and death in our communities. The lessons can only happen by the constant recollection of the spiritual principles which are given to shape and inform our actions. There is, to be sure, forgiveness and mercy. But that doesn't mean cheap grace. You might think, "O well, God will forgive me, so who cares." Wrong. God does care. You might think, of course, "O yeah, God will forgive me, but wait a second, Mr. D. Walsh won't!" Then you come closer to realizing the interrelation of justice and mercy that Shakespeare teaches in *The Merchant of Venice*. There can be no mercy without honouring justice, for "mercy seasons justice." We are called to account only to find that we are, of course, wanting. To realize that is itself a great mercy. It means to be thinking seriously about the things which really matter without, of course, taking ourselves too seriously.

Hailstones and coals of fire! What you have done this week is nothing short of amazing. In a spirited and purposeful fashion, you have willed to do the impractical, improbable and outrageous things that have been demanded of you. Such things don't just happen. You have to will them in order to bring them into being. Nothing happens if we take things for granted. Nothing happens except destruction and disorder if we don't will the things which are given to us to do.

Nothing happens if we don't will the spiritual, intellectual, and moral principles that belong to the life of the school.

"This is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven". It is written on the wall of this Church. It refers to a story, an important story and one that Mr. K. Walsh should appreciate. It is about Jacob *wrestling* with God, striving with God. In the struggle he is renamed Israel, *one who strives with God*. You, too, have striven with God in the demands that have been made of you. And you are all, I hope, the better for it.

We have a place with God. There is a purpose and a direction belonging to the principles of the school. In the lesson which Kate read we have a marvelous vision from Jeremiah not only about *the healing of our wounded and broken humanity* but about *the whole of creation restored and redeemed*. There is a *cosmic dimension* to redemption signaled in the Ascension and the Session of Christ.

And in the lesson which Alex read, we learn that the spiritual and the intellectual make demands on us morally and practically. It means *"walk[ing] in love"*, the love of God made visible in the sacrifice of Christ. It means being awake, in other words, paying attention, and committing ourselves to what is right and true.

Such things embrace our remembrance, too, of *The Victory in Europe* sixty years ago and its cost in so many lives lost through the tyranny of power abused and misused. The power of totalitarian regimes in every generation is the power that denies the truth and the authority of God and in so doing destroys and denies the dignity and the truth of our humanity. *"We are to kneel before God"*, John Paul II once said, *"but we are to stand up to tyrants"*. The Victory in Europe was about standing up to tyranny. When we fail to do that we become complicit in corruption ourselves. It is, perhaps, the challenge for us in our day too.

Today is Mother's Day, too, a day to honour your mothers. The school, too, is your mother, the *alma mater* of your adolescence, the nursing mother of the days of your growing up. The Church, too, is Mother Church, where Mary *"mothers each new grace"* and *"holds high motherhood/ towards our ghostly good/ And plays in grace her part/ About man's beating heart"*, as Hopkins puts it, comparing Mary to the air we breathe, *"the wild, world-mothering air"* that engages us with the heavenly things of God.

In every way we are recalled to the spiritual and intellectual principles that at once *transcend* and *embrace* every aspect of our lives. There is an end to education, an end that shall not end, a purpose that signals our participation in the high and heavenly things of God. The things worth doing are the things worth doing well, the things that bestow grace and dignity, the things that lift us up out of ourselves and into the presence of God. *"God has gone up with a merry noise"* and we are blessed. Such things have happened.

Reverend David Curry
KES Church Parade
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