

SUCCESS IS LIVING BY YOUR VALUES

Building Your House on Rock not Sand (Matthew 7:14)

*Founders Day Sermon for Queens College
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It is a great pleasure and privilege to be here this morning for our Founders Day service. I know that some of you had hoped Her Majesty the Queen - our patron - might come and open the sixth from centre but I'm afraid it is just an old Queen's girl instead. However, if she had joined us this morning she would have been amazed at what has been achieved. There are so many people to thank for this incredible extension of the college it would take all day but certainly Francis' vision and leadership in driving forward the new build has to be acknowledged. So a huge thank you from all the staff, pupils and parents.

It is simply amazing, the light and space and wonder this building has, and that high up on Hartley street you can now have groups of sixth form Queen's girls - lower and upper - happily sharing their space, study and stories together.

When I visited it a couple of weeks ago the enthusiasm from the students was palpable and what I found extraordinary was that as well as enjoying the facilities - being able to make tea and coffee and chat - there was serious studying going on as well. I am sure the parents are glad to hear that.

So as of today the official opening of the sixth form has happened ... a cord cut and chocolate given out all round. And on the subject of buildings, we have had a very nicely read reading from the Gospel of Matthew about the need to build on rock not sand. This got me thinking about the rock and the ethos of Queens.

There is literally building on rock which of course our architects and our the bursar will have made sure we have done, but what about the rock of Queens? Not a physical rock of course, but the spiritual rock of the school. What does it mean for us? What is the central tenant which makes not only Queens so special but also all the girls that attend and the teachers that nurture their unique characters?

Well for better guidance let us go back to our Founders ..

Frederick Denison Maurice. Chairman of the committee (made up entirely of men), professor of English Literature and History at Kings College London and a Christian socialist thinker, he recognised the need for girls to study for and gain an academic qualification. In 1853 Queens College gained a Royal Charter from Queen Victoria and the following year Royal Patronage.

The words that formed the founding documents included “the instruction of ladies generally” and “to raise the status and self-respect of governesses generally”; quite modest aims to our ears, but at the time this turned out to be quite controversial.

The Quarterly Review, a popular literary and political periodical of the time, published a rather petty article about the education of the ladies at Queen’s College. The article expressed concern that the more open-minded and philosophical teaching of the professors at Queens would “produce evil effects if it is imparted to their pupils“.

In response, Maurice wrote an open letter to the Bishop of London, strongly defending his stance on female education and, furthermore, asking His Lordship if he would be their Visitor (and he is to this day).

The central tenant of Maurice’s plan for Queen’s College was this:

“We must not , by our acts, confess that public opinion is our master, and that we are its slaves. Colleges for men and women in this great city exist to testify that Opinion is not the God they ought to worship”.

This strikes me as at the core of the spirit of Queen’s College; that we must set our own criteria as to what matters to us, not what matters to public opinion.

Great women came out of Queens. Miss Beale and Miss Bust are famous early graduates; headmistresses of Cheltenham Ladies College and of North London Collegiate School for Girls respectively. But surprisingly it wasn’t until 1932 that we had our first female head, Miss Gertrude Holloway. Her distinctive approach, advocating self-confidence, free thought and open mindedness has continued the spirit of Maurice’s philosophy through to the present day.

So, what is success? How can we formulate what it is today? Is it winning Britain’s Got Talent or getting into Oxbridge?

I would argue that success is living by your values, and living by your values means looking beyond your grades and academic achievements and beyond the normal mode of opinion.

A theological example of this would be the parable of the Good Samaritan: a suffering man on the side of the road is ignored by a Levite and Pharasee – both upstanding citizens – but it is the lowly Samaritan who came to the man’s aid. The Samaritan is the one who looks beyond societal prejudices and simply sees a suffering human who needs help.

A more contemporary example of challenging the status quo, I found in the Sunday Times, is Mark Goldring’s (Chief Executive of Oxfam GB) critique of an international conference on the future of Syria and the region. He said,

“... the work of rebuilding must start on the solid foundations of a *political solution and respect for human rights*. While it is important to maintain humanitarian aid, providing funding to rebuild the country could do more harm than good if these fundamental conditions are not met.”

Mark's thinking looks deeper into the issue, in this case peace and development in Syria, and in doing so questions the normal and established mode of thinking. We need people who think like this in the world!

Questioning the norm is central to our ethos at the Children's Radio Foundation where young people are encouraged, through their radio training, to think critically through local development issues. Why don't we have clean water in our township? What are the police doing about gender-based violence? How can we stop TB spreading in our community? These are all critical questions that need fresh answers and challenging solutions.

Middlemarch is many readers' favourite Eliot novel with a lovely valedictory celebration of Dorothea's quiet life after she has renounced Casaubon's fortune and confessed her love for Ladislaw. I would like to end with this:

"But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs".

At Queen's we encourage you to be inspired by the Good Samaritan, by Mark Goldring, by Dorothea; to be critical thinkers and global inquisitors. This is the spiritual rock that Queen's rests on and that will support you throughout your life.

Amen.