

Chapel Service – 13th September 2019
By Mr Gardner, Head of Lower School and Housemaster Queen Mary House

Reading:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.
At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel,
creeping like snail unwillingly to school.
And then the lover, Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Then a soldier, bearded like the pard,
sudden and quick in quarrel,
And then the justice,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
The sixth age shifts into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
Last scene of all, that ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Sermon:

The English and Drama department, and possibly some of you will be quite cross with me right now as I have just shamefully abridged one of Shakespeare's most famous speeches. I am sure you will forgive me. Unless, of course, you are in Act 3 or 4 of your 'play'...

For those of you that do not know, that was a speech written for the character of Jacques, in *As You Like It*, by William Shakespeare.

It tells us that Jacques views the world as a stage show and that all human beings are merely actors. That we have all been cast, assigned our roles, and all we need to do is play them out. You enter the stage (you are born) and you go through the motions of the text before exiting at the end (you die).

Now, I have directed many plays. I consider myself to be quite good at it too. Lots of you here in this Chapel this morning has worked under my direction – *Lord of the Flies; After Juliet; The Government Inspector*. These were excellent productions. Partly because of my direction. Absolutely – I am taking some credit, thank you very much.

So, according to Jacques, I believe that this places my status at God level. I am a God. If you are the players and I am the Director, I must, in that moment have been God. I told you how to live your time on that stage and you did it. You did it well. So, not only was I a God, I was also an excellent God.

But I am, I'm afraid, going to completely undermine myself here. Because every moment of brilliance that has occurred in one of those productions has been the result of an actor / actress - one of you- using your imagination, creativity and, it has to be said, coming away from the page and putting your own stamp on things – using your mind to interpret something in a new and different way.

So, what's my point here? My point is that brilliant people take risks. They do not simply accept what they are told. They ask questions. They chew things over. They try to do things differently, not for the sake of it or to be difficult, but to make the outcome even better. They move away from the certain, the easy way, and go into the unknown, bravely.

I do not believe that my life is perfectly mapped out for me like a play. Whilst I inevitably will hit each of the seven stages, at some point I am not going to believe that someone holds my fate for me. If my life is a play that has been written, then I can tell you that it would be difficult to classify: a comedy meets tragedy, meets romance, meets action, meets thriller meets reality, meets sport, meets utterly boring.. I do, however, enjoy considering this

metaphor – it can be quite silly and fun when you play around with it. You should try it. For example, I often consider how this matches my process of being a parent myself. When my first child was born nine years ago, I have to say that my wife and I were absolutely... petrified. There was this helpless, human being before us that could do absolutely nothing, other than cry and scream and demand stuff – selfish, especially when you consider the language barrier! This was, ‘The infant, mewling and puking’, as Jacques would say. Babies are helpless. Helpless but terrifying. But I think you could liken my wife and I to a mewling and puking infant too, in that moment – we were so exhausted that all we wanted to do was lie down in a darkened room and sob ourselves to sleep. We felt sick with fatigue, sick with the emotional rollercoasters that never ended, and all the while listening to our friends and family gloating at how they were through that challenging stage.

And then, with routines sorted and calmness just about restored... WE HAD TO GO BACK TO WORK! Imagine going to school on zero sleep and burst ear drums, let alone not having been able to find the time to feed yourself a balanced, nutritional diet. Yes, I became the ‘the whining school-boy, with his satchel, creeping like snail unwillingly to school’. But I was a 27-year-old mewling and puking infant-teacher! WHAT THE HECK WAS GOING ON?!

So, whilst this can be quite a fun thing to do, do not ever think, please, that you do not have control of your path through life. Take this place, King Edward’s Witley, for example. It is a school. It has a mission. You are the most important ‘asset’ of this school and there are multiple routes you can take whilst you are here.

There are institutions: schools, businesses etc. that are brilliant at shaping and moulding people into what benefits them, the institution, the most. The result? People who think and behave in the same way. Catastrophically boring and, in my mind, totally dangerous. King Edward’s is not one of these places. It never has been and never will be.

Now, this term we are writing the next School’s next chapter, we are at the beginning of a new stage. We have 140 new students. We have a new Head, Mrs Wright. The first female Head in the history of the School. We have a new Deputy Head, Mr Corran. This is genuinely

a new 'Act', as Jacques would say, and we all have 'entered' the stage for this 'act'. But let's not be restricted to what he says – let's move away from the page – let's listen to each other, let's consider how we can be better, let's work together to be creative, courageous and bold. You will have many avenues to take - not just seven - and many choices to make - not just what you are directed to do. It should be exciting. All of us in this Chapel are growing, learning all the time. ALL OF US. Do not tell yourself who you are and remain fixed on this. That would be a mistake, because you do not know. How could you? Do not let ANYONE ELSE tell you who you are or exactly what you should do in life. They, quite frankly, do not know. How could they?

I am going to leave you with a simple but far more effective and exciting piece of advice from Shakespeare and hope that you will all seek to take inspiration from it. Now and then. 'Then' being the future.

We know what we are but know not what we may be.