

Handing Over

Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School, Blackburn

Founder's Day Service, 500th Anniversary

Blackburn Cathedral - 3 July 2009

There is a very old joke – they always say the old ones are the best – there is a very old joke about preachers and King Henry VIII. It is that the opening gambit of preachers should always be the same as Henry's opening gambit to each of his six wives: 'Don't worry, I shan't keep you long!' For *you* such a promise is rather more positive than it was for Katherine of Aragon, whom Henry married five hundred years ago this year. It was equally worrying indeed also for his other five wives.

I begin, however, with Henry since it was, on 21st April, the five hundredth anniversary of his accession to the throne of England, which was the same year as your great school was founded. So this is indeed a most significant milestone in your history. It was, of course, Henry's daughter Elizabeth who gave her name to your school when it was granted its Royal Charter in 1567.

Nevertheless, there are other reasons why Henry may have something to teach us, but I shall return to that in a moment. Let me remind you first of just a tiny snippet from our gospel reading. Jesus says: 'All things have been handed over to me by my Father.' It is a very deep, if slightly cryptic, piece but that simple phrase *handed over* is fascinating. The word it translates has a multitude of meanings – it does mean 'handed over', and so it can even mean *betraying*. When Jesus is betrayed he is *handed over*. But it is also the word which we call *tradition*. Tradition is, after all, something that is handed over from age to age.

Tradition might be one good stopping point on this five hundred anniversary – it is one of those words that's bandied about a lot in schools. We used to have *tradition* in our school! Ours was the Stationers' Company's School in London and once a year the court of the Stationers' Company paraded among us in extraordinary clothes – even odder than those I'm wearing now. There was lots of fur and ermine and silk. I thought that was what *tradition* was – something very archaic and old-fashioned! Henry VIII, however, teaches us otherwise. Let me give just two examples. Go to Hampton Court, Henry's great palace in London and one is amazed by the glory and grandeur of the building. It looks to us to be the quintessence of tradition, of the ancient of days. But actually Henry took over an older building and transformed it. Hampton Court was *then* the essence of the modern, but it also included within itself something much older. Any moment now we hope an equally adventurous development will begin here at Blackburn cathedral. So, tradition is dynamic, it is about moving *forward* in the *spirit* of the past. It is not about preserving the past as it always was.

The other example is here in this place. It was Henry who transformed our church. He was in one sense a conservative. He believed all that was believed in the catholic church of the day. But by the changes he made, he (and later Elizabeth, his daughter) developed it. So much remained – bishops, priests and deacons – cathedrals – in Henry's time even much of the ritual. Tradition then is worth celebrating. It means 'handing over' the best we have been given, but allowing that handover to be dynamic, to allow new things too – development. Quite a good motto for a five hundredth anniversary. God stands at the heart of such a dynamic.

For my second and final stopping point – I promised not to keep you long – let me return to that poem we just heard read. It will have captured a feeling that so many parents have when they first take a son or daughter to school:

' I can see

You walking away from me towards the school?

Once again it is a very dramatic, clear and moving hand over. This takes us right to the heart of the Christian faith. For when Jesus is *betrayed* by Judas, he is *handed over*. Now Jesus allows others to do to him. Jesus is free to give himself away. In fact, Jesus exemplifies how God gives himself to us and allows us the freedom to receive him or reject him. It is captured perfectly in those final lines of the poem:

‘ Perhaps it is roughly
Saying what God alone could perfectly show –
How selfhood begins with a walking away,
And love is proved in the letting go.’

Here is a very clear *handing over*. When a parent lets go and allows their child to become their own person, then they are learning to be a good parent. In a similar way, we become most truly who we are by learning to let ourselves go – just as Jesus gave himself over. It is not pride, selfishness and poise that define who we are but self-offering and handing ourselves over in service to the world.

What can we hand over, with God’s grace, as you Q.E.G.S. look to the next five hundred years? What will be your gift to the future?

Amen.

Readings:

Matthew 11. 25-30

Walking Away – Cecil Day Lewis