

## **OB Day Chapel Sermon given by Andrew Berrow**

**(Staff 1997-present, Head of RS 1998-present, Housemaster of Petergate 1999-2012, Head of Boarding 2006-2012 and Senior Master 2012-present)**

I love that reading that we heard from Ecclesiastes. It comes from a body of work in the Old Testament known as Wisdom literature and it isn't hard to see why it was called that. There is a long view taken of life, a long view that we see represented in Chapel today, from the youngest Year 9 to the, how do I put this politely, to the most seasoned OB. But what does Ecclesiastes mean to say, Ed Winslow? Ed has just woken up from daydreaming about this afternoon's match or indeed Esme Whitefield who until about a second ago was smiling inwardly at her classmate's discomfiture. In an effort to keep them awake, I'll avoid picking apart its complex theology and focus on two of its themes, the changing seasons and the importance of taking the long view.

I am lucky enough to teach a really fantastic GCSE English set, a group I really enjoy teaching. Last year's class were all Germans, here for a year. Seeing our national life through their eyes was really interesting as they arrived in the school at the time of the death of her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth. There was the pomp and pageantry, emotion and sense of loss that went with the magnificence of the funeral and they watched it patiently, with interest and a sense of curiosity as the ancient rituals unfolded over the week. I made sure that they went back to Germany with a vocabulary designed to confuse their teachers. I'd love to see a German English teacher when faced with words like catafalque. A few months later, and the same soldiers, uniforms and ancient buildings were once again pressed into service for a ceremony with a very different feel as the new King was crowned. A time to weep became a time to dance as the season turned.

They thought that it was all terribly British.

OK so it's not all about royalty, what about our daily life in school? In my time here, I have seen the changing rhythms of the life of a Blundellian many times over. And while Ecclesiastes urges us to be happy (perhaps a precursor to Bob Marley), life at school isn't always easy. There are the nerves of the new pupils on their first day. Do you remember that feeling? They are so often dressed in a jacket so big that their hands are invisible, on the grounds that "they will grow into it". Eating becomes more a matter of sucking their food off the ends of the sleeves after they have inevitably flopped into the plate. Or an international student at the beginning of the year, in a new country, a shaky grasp of the language in a system they don't understand. They are apprehensive and nervous. What do the years ahead hold? There are those who fit in quickly and there are those who find it all a bit harder and take longer to find their place but find their place they will. That's what's so important about a supportive community, it

values everyone. That's one of the things that makes Blundell's so special, it gives people an opportunity to grow into themselves. I believe in Blundellians: you are generally comfortable in your own skins yet untainted by arrogance or complacency. Much of that is down to the quality of the people in this chapel. You look out for each other and you value each other. I'm not pretending it's perfect, it isn't, but the quality of the relationships you build here are truly remarkable and many of you will keep them for the rest of your lives. You are members of a very special community, one that will not disappear when you leave. Don't take it for granted. Today a group of OBs who competed at Bisley in their teens will present shooting awards to the current shooting team. They are a group known as the magpies and the oldest members are in their 70s and 80s and they have not lost touch since their school days. That is the quality of the community to which you belong. It can truly be yours for life. That is unusual, and a very precious and distinctive part of Blundell's life.

Why does this happen? I think that much of the answer lies in the house system. No matter what your skills are, they are important to the house at a particular moment in the year as each individual is given a chance to shine. Shortly before half-term next term, the musicians will be the most important members of the house as they attempt to corral a random selection of notes into something resembling a tune, or persuade a nervous Grade 1 who hasn't picked up their trumpet for a couple of years to take part in the house ensemble. By December, the Rugby and Hockey players step up as house matches come around, Spring sees the Russell, for many of you a time to weep/ this is when the runners take the lead (I'd like to apologise formally for that pun but Mr Hamilton writes my jokes) and you wonder how someone like Zinzan can run up Heartbreak Hill without even having the grace to break a sweat, finishing the race in time to do the fun run as a warm down afterwards. It is this turning of the seasons in the house that gives each of you an opportunity to seize your moment, to contribute to your house and indeed the school. This builds community that we enjoy. It is a simple formula, but it works.

Within the well-established ebb and flow of the school year are your personal rhythms too. Those times when things are hard for you, and it feels like a time to weep or indeed a time to give up. Those moments when it all feels a bit much and that you have lost your way, or you just feel a bit alone. Again, Ecclesiastes takes the long view; there is a time to weep and a time to laugh. While it is important to be happy, it would be foolish to expect this all of the time. It's just not possible and it would be a futile and rather shallow aim. You have friends around you and, if you're lucky you'll have one who knows the difference between the time to speak and the time to simply be silent and be with you.

And then there are those total disasters when everything seems lost. I'll never forget standing on the touchline for the final 1st XV match of the season. My deputy head of house was on the wing near the

OH dog run. He was tackled badly, and I clearly heard the crack of the bone breaking from where I was standing. There was a pause and then the most awful scream. That was bad enough, but he was due for his RAF medical the following week and the serious nature of the break meant that the career he so desperately wanted looked unlikely. The last time I heard from him the season had turned, he had come through it all and was a chinook helicopter pilot in the Army Air Corps. I'm not pretending that every story has a happy ending, but often what looks like a disaster in the short term can feel very different when viewed with perspective. I'm sure that some of our OBs remember a difficult moment in their school careers whose lesson has proved critical in later life.

I am always in admiration of those of you who undertake those tough endurance challenges, Brad's marathons, the Ten Tors challenge, the Devizes to Westminster canoe race -125 miles over four days. That challenge is always met with a positive attitude, stoicism and, most importantly, humour. I'll never forget one girl who did the whole thing powered entirely by Haribo gummy bears rather than the recommended pasta-based high energy diets. She absolutely refused to take it seriously and laughed her way to the finish, singing inappropriate songs along the way with her partner. Her success was a triumph of haribo, humour and determination over biology. Then you get those remarkable people, Jack Ramsay, I'm looking at you, who do the Devizes to Westminster and, two weeks later, the 45 mile Ten Tors challenge. These sorts of achievements do not come easily, and I have no doubt that the preparation and training would have had some really low points along the way, but they have come through that and the expressions on their faces as they cross the line at the end of Ten Tors tells its own story. A time to weep has become a time to dance, blisters permitting.

In a few weeks we will have Speech Day and you will be addressed by some of the Upper Sixth. Those who are speaking are properly impressive people, they have made the very most of their time at the school and have achieved much. I'll not forget William Bucknell who spoke in 2021 at the end of a really difficult year disrupted by the pandemic. It's a speech that stayed with me for its humility and gratitude. He was delightfully understated in a Blundellian sort of a way, but the depth and breadth of his achievements shone through. He had been a regular member of the 1<sup>st</sup> XI, had been one of the leads in all the school plays in every age group, had played the trumpet to Grade 5 standard had won an Arkwright Scholarship, as well as completing his Gold D of E and Ten Tors. He was a school monitor and unsurprisingly liked and respected by his peers. Most of us would have been hugely proud of just one of his achievements, but there was not a trace of arrogance or self-satisfaction. I re-watched his speech last night and two themes ran through it, gratitude for the opportunities that he had had, and a strong message to younger Blundellians to make the most of this season of their lives. His closing

words were “Take the opportunities that the school offers you and you will achieve much more than you would have thought possible”. He was the embodiment of that principle and a truly impressive man as a result.

And so where do I end up? There is a season for everything. Highs, lows, broken legs, haribos, coronations and funerals. Blundellians, you are in one season of your lives, OBs a different one. Whichever season you are in, recognize that it doesn't last for ever, for good or ill. One thing that is obvious from those who speak at Speech Day is that these precious school days are over all too quickly and it is vital, like Will, to seize the moment and its opportunities.

The reading we heard earlier ended with the words “I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live.” And that seems to me as good a principle to live by as any other.