

Friday 23 September 2022

Dear Everyone

Pre-Prep's Harvest Festival assembly in the crypt this morning was a wonderfully uplifting moment, and felt like a new launch of the term. As Maddy Smyth, Head of Pre-Prep said in her introduction, our school values include those of love and community, and with so many parents also present, that was felt very strongly.

At the beginning of the week, and as the nation came to a pause on Monday, either in front of the telly, or with aching legs along the processional route, or ignoring it altogether and doing something else, it was a moment for reflection.

COVID lockdown, that other much longer anthropause, seems now a long time ago. Yet its effects linger. The WFH vs back in the office question rumbles on, but other things are manifest. Domestic lives shifted, the unreadiness of children for school persists for some, and the unsettled have not always settled. How we look after each other, and listen to those hesitant underground noises, or sometimes cries of outrage is more important than ever.

Listening is hard. We sometimes hear things we don't like. This week I attended a conference at which a number of speakers were drawing attention to the creeping suppression of academic freedoms in Higher Education, and in many areas of corporate life. Their main point is that as institutions within a democracy, being able to challenge contested ideas is crucial. No-platforming and cancel culture is real, and is bleeding into disciplinary policies, and is woven into regulation over what can and cannot be said, or even thought. Dogma becomes policy.

It is, as one person from the floor observed, the little suppressions that become habits of conformity. Another comment made a distinction between criticism of ideas and principles, and denunciation, where there is no possible response if you are denounced. Who, said another, has the monopoly on defining 'harms'? Who decides what is offensive? Another commented that we appear to have drifted into a puritanical intolerance of difference, despite all the best efforts of EDI frameworks – perhaps even because of them when enacted without thought for context, or when they stray from protected characteristics and move towards promoting a particular ideological position. For some academics, it is a matter of keeping their jobs, or not, if they have caused offence to someone in the legitimate cause of provoking debate, criticism and learning.

Some years ago, the then President of English PEN Lisa Appignanesi, published a collection of writing under the title *Free Expression Is No Offence*, a book that, sadly, is even more relevant today than it was in 2005. As a community with a very distinct global outlook and parent body, these challenges don't just relate to our own shores.

All of us have a duty, I would argue, to equip young people in how to have difficult conversations about ideas they don't agree with.

Thank you to so many of you that completed the transport survey. It is very helpful to know and understand how your children get here, and is always useful when we're asked to comment on transport planning in the City.

Some of you are regular users of the various rail networks, and in the news, *Thomas The Tank Engine* has a new character, Bruno the Brake Car.

<https://www.theguardian.com/global/2022/sep/07/thomas-the-tank-engine-to-introduce-first-autistic-character>

Here is the *Thomas The Tank Engine* theme tune played as ragtime, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRYS4ItUVAA> with hints of *Take the A Train*, and other tunes and finishes with a flourish from *Black and White Rag*, the tune used for the snooker programme *Pot Black* in the days of Ray Reardon and Fred Davis. The brainchild of David Attenborough, *Pot Black* was launched to show case new colour telly technology.

Here is the original *Black and White Rag* played by Trinidadian pianist Winifred Atwell.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLN8AiQk-dw>

For those of you who are watching in black and white, the pink is next to the green...

I've met and talked to lots of heads this week. One of them says that they occasionally ask parents about their hobbies, as a surreptitious way to finding out if they have their own hinterland, or whether their child is their hobby. And I'm almost certainly late to the party on this one, another Head recommended *French Children Don't Throw Food*. I've read a few chunks through the Amazon preview feature, and page four seems to make a lot of sense. So, I'll keep reading.

This weekend our new Dean, The Very Revd Andrew Tremlett, will be formally installed at the Sunday Evensong. We look forward to welcoming him and his wife Maggi to our community.

Have a good weekend,

Simon