

St Marylebone School. 3-xi-2011

Philippians IV: 4-9

1791 a year of change and convulsion in Europe.

Communication over long distances speeded up with the unveiling of the first semaphore machine in Paris.

There were new ideas in the air. The premier of Die Zauberflöte in Vienna.

Old Institutions rocked. The French Royal family was captured attempting to escape the country.

Your school was founded. It was an inspired response to a time of profound change. Schools are places where communities seek to transcend the present and build a better future. Schools offer a distillation of what we know about the human story so far; they prepare young people to flourish; to enjoy life and to live up to their responsibilities as active citizens. Schools address matters that are urgent for their contemporaries and do so in the service of a better future.

One of the aspects of 1791 was great religious turmoil. France was just about to try the experiment of abolishing the Church in favour of the Cult of Reason.

There is once again religious turmoil in our own time. The Editor of the Economist has written a book about our 21st century world entitled “God is Back”. If the Editor of the Economist says so – we had better believe it. One of the essential aspects of any modern 21st century education, whether or not we have a personal faith, is to learn how to distinguish between healthful and lethal religion and how to participate in a common conversation about the world we want to build together and how to turn that conversation into cooperative action. I am glad to be celebrating a school which takes this aspect of education seriously.

But there are at least three other aspects of the unfolding human drama to which young women at school now will make a decisive contribution.

At home we have had our small scale culture wars – though nothing on the scale of the French Revolution. On the one hand some stress discipline, the common values and the national story whose finest hour was perhaps in Churchill’s Britain. In the other corner after the social revolution of the 1960’s the emphasis is on individual rights and the freedom to do my own thing. Now we need to find a language and a fresh emphasis on stable and enriching relationships which recognises the virtues in

both positions but transcends them both. This is urgent work in the light of the events in many parts of London in August. I would like to pay tribute to this school under the leadership of Elizabeth Philips for having created a culture which does in deed point the way to a new synthesis between freedom and disciplined responsibility.

Then internationally we are moving into a new multi-polar world. The diversity of students at this school with the diversity of culture and faith represented here is a huge educational advantage as we seek to develop a genuinely global conversation of the wise which is committed to establishing the conditions for mutual flourishing and creative harmony.

Ours is a world in which the West as it emerged from the Reformation; Enlightenment and the French Experiment still has significant influence but we have already left behind the unchallengeable hegemony of the kind that the US enjoyed for a brief period after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Such times of transition have in the past led to violence. There is work to do in ensuring that this time it is different.

Lastly we need a fresh sense of the importance of harmony in our relations with the natural

world. Human beings are intimately related to the health of our planetary home, the earth. The effects of treating the earth as nothing more than a theatre of human willing and exploitation without limit are becoming daily more visible.

There are students here today I am convinced who will see their responsibility to make a contribution to all these unfolding themes and others I cannot see.

I say all this because I am not cynical and I believe that cynicism is the death of civilisation and a grave disease. Given the best possible educational start in this school, founded 220 years ago and recognised today as an outstanding academy of learning I believe that this generation of St Marylebone girls will not fail us.

Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say rejoice.

Be careful for nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God.

And the peace of God which passeth all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.