

Jon Mutton, Headmaster: Exhibition Speech, 23 May 2026

Welcome to Exhibition 2026. It is a great pleasure to be able to address you this morning at prizegiving.

I thought it important to begin by mentioning, at my second prizegiving as Headmaster, that I am very much still enjoying the role!

The time spent in community with your children is a blessing and, ever the educationalist, a chance for learning.

Recently, standing in Theatre Square as part of my usual morning routine, welcoming the pupils to their first lesson of the day, I asked a member of the Sixth Form how their focus on lateness was going. I received a tremendous reply that the pupil had been 'reflecting deeply on their punctuality' - a wonderful answer. As it was already 08.42 for the 08.40 lesson, regrettably, reflection, like this pupil's punctuality, may have arrived slightly too late to be fully effective.

There is something deeply reassuring about Prize Giving each year. Public examinations are finished – for 10 days at least - trunks and suitcases are beginning to appear in corridors, Matrons are running around getting ready for all the visitors as well as ensuring their charges haven't forgotten anything in their packing, and we gather together to celebrate what has been another remarkable year in the life of this wonderful school.

Prize Giving matters because we want to celebrate the efforts and successes of our entire pupil body – of course, too numerous to mention individually. The characters formed, friendships made, setbacks overcome, the quiet acts of perseverance.

While it is nice to receive a prize, in our Benedictine school especially, we understand that good education is not transactional. We are not here simply to win awards, to produce examination results — though I am delighted to say that our pupils continue to achieve extremely well. We are here to form young people of substance: intellectually alive, spiritually grounded, compassionate in service, and resilient in character.

When I talk about resilience I don't mean surviving Y9 Latin lessons with yours truly as many of our Y13 leavers managed.

This world is complex – possibly more complex than ever – and perhaps we make it so.

We live in a society increasingly marked by anxiety, division, speed, and noise. Public discourse can often feel dominated by outrage rather than understanding; economic uncertainty weighs heavily on many families; and technology is reshaping the way human beings relate to one another at astonishing speed.

Only recently, Pope Leo reflected on the development of Artificial Intelligence and warned that technology must never diminish human dignity or weaken our moral responsibility to one another. His concern was not anti-technology — indeed, schools like ours must prepare pupils for a much more technologically sophisticated world — but he reminded us that wisdom and moral judgement cannot simply be outsourced to machines. Shakespeare has Hamlet, pretending to be mad, ponder the question 'to be or not to be'. When we deal with chat-bots or avatars, AI invites us to ponder 'to be or to pretend to be'.

This can be very lonely as Abbot Robert underlined so well in Exhibition Mass yesterday evening.

This is a profoundly important challenge for educators. Our mission at Ampleforth, the formation of young people in all aspects of their humanity, feels more needed and more consequential than ever.

For our leavers, a common question is "What jobs will exist in twenty years?" Clearly this is very important but at Ampleforth, we are most interested in the question "What sort of human beings will our young people become?"

Will they know how to think critically? Will they know how to listen fully and openly? *Listen with the ear of your heart* as St Benedict tells us at the beginning of the Rule.

Will they understand truth, beauty, sacrifice, service, compassion, faith? Will they possess inner resilience when life becomes difficult? These are not optional extras in our education. They are foundational. Things that our Compass for Life provides.

Ampleforth is particularly renowned for its pastoral care and incredibly rich co-curricular offering. But I want to make clear that the academic life of the school is equally important. Scholarship is at the very heart of Benedictine culture and we prize learning as central to the formation of all our young people. We also work to foster a love of learning as an end in itself. Over the past year, we have focused on strengthening and reinvigorating the tradition of Benedictine scholarship. Our staff are very skilled at getting to know the talents, and also the challenges, of their pupils and supporting them accordingly.

Top quality academics is at the core of our holistic educational offering. We have restructured our academic management structure so that next year, 6 highly-skilled Heads of Faculty, working alongside Helen Pepper as Deputy Head Academic, will be forensically focused on making sure that each of our pupils achieves their very best academically.

Our work to help pupils choose the right educational paths for them continues to be successful. Hearing the ambitions of our Academic Scholars in their weekly scholars' workshops, seeing them being intellectually stretched, and challenged to think more deeply and critically, is inspiring.

A Benedictine education should produce thoughtful young men and women who know how to think, not merely what to think.

Following our Sport theme last year, this has been the year of the Theatre with a fantastic array of opportunities for our pupils in drama and the rest of the arts. Our Dance provision has expanded, LAMDA examination results were excellent with 100% awarded Distinctions or Merits, and all of our public exam drama students have been commended by their external examiners. Our pupils have worked with industry professionals, watched award-winning theatre companies, participated in professional workshops, and taken part in outstanding performances. Those of you who had the pleasure of watching Beauty and the Beast back in January will certainly agree. Earlier this week, I saw pupils in Y7-10 perform in the Exhibition Play, The Hathersage Sisters. Pupils devised the piece with the support of staff and performed it to a promenading audience in eight different parts of the theatre. It was enormously creative and clever and very inspiring for all the pupils involved as well as the audience.

With the addition this year of Textiles into our curriculum, it feels entirely fitting that next year our theme will be the celebration of Art and Design. At a time when creativity is often undervalued in national conversations about education, we intend to champion it unapologetically.

As this school year draws to a close, I would like to mention a few highlights from the extraordinarily busy calendar of events. Music is in the blood of all Amplefordians - as we heard yesterday evening in the Abbey Church – and the whole School singing Compline together is often raised by pupils as one of the most moving experiences in the Valley. Bach's mesmerising St John Passion, and our Advent by Candlelight concert, were wonderful moments in the Schola's extensive repertoire this year. We've already heard our marvellous pipe band this morning and will soon hear from the orchestra – thank you all of you. I must mention the amazing strings masterclass and workshop the Music Department put on this year with internationally acclaimed cellist Matthew Sharp drawing in over 100 young musicians from across the region.

Following the very successful hockey and rugby tour to South Africa last summer, the boys rugby side enjoyed a good season, with a highlight perhaps as losing semi-finalists in the Ampleforth VIs competition. Our girls 1st XI hockey team reached the national finals and the U16 team got through to the NE of England finals. We reintroduced Lacrosse to our sports programme much to the girls' delight and enjoyment. And the 32 pupils running 200m relay race at our much-loved Inter-House athletics competition was the best ever. 4 of our school track and field records were broken that day.

It was a joy to welcome members of the Manquehue community, a lay Benedictine movement in Chile, to share our life in the Valley for two months during the Lent Term. Their support for our Chaplaincy programme was invaluable and we are delighted that so many of our leavers go and spend time working in their schools in Chile in their gap years.

As I've said already, enriching academic experiences beyond the curriculum are important and we are proud of all of our pupils who won particularly prestigious prizes, both in the Royal Society of Chemistry's Top of the Bench competition and Chemistry Olympiad, as well as those who took part in the academically challenging Da Vinci Decathlon competition. The student team which runs our Model United Nations Society took part in the International Model United Nations Conference in London last November, with 2 of our 10 delegates appointed as judges in the mock International Court of Justice – an impressive achievement.

Talking of discourse and deliberation, do come and listen to the debate on '*whether the future with AI will respect human dignity*' which is taking place in the library this afternoon. Our pupils are so lucky to have such a wonderful place in which to study. This year is the 150th anniversary of the birth of Robert Mouseman Thompson, the famous master craftsman who, out of all his work, was most proud of our Library.

Our science block, the Bamford Centre, was refurbished this year thanks to the generosity of Lord Bamford. The Year 12 recipients of Lord Bamford's JCB Engineering or Business Sixth Form Scholarships have benefited from the advice and support of their JCB Mentors and will take up their first work experience placements this summer.

We always have an eye on what lies beyond the valley for our pupils and our annual Higher Education Conference gets bigger and better every year, supported by a programme of careers talks and other inspiring lectures which open pupils' eyes to new ideas and possibilities. Just after he had won several BAFTAs for producing the film *I Swear*, a powerful film about a Tourette's Syndrome sufferer and campaigner, one of our OAs and current parents, Piers Tempest, came and did exactly that. His message was that the most important skill in filmmaking is the ability to work with anyone and everyone, something which Amplefordians are particularly good at.

It is important to acknowledge that these are challenging times for the independent sector. Across the country, schools face rising costs, financial pressures, demographic shifts, and increasing uncertainty. Many excellent schools are having to make difficult decisions. We are certainly not immune from those realities. And yet, I am pleased to say that Ampleforth remains in a position of strength.

That strength comes not from complacency, but from clarity of purpose: our Catholic Benedictine Mission which is at the heart of all that we do; the stability and strength of our community, our full-boarding model, which works for both boarders and day pupils; and our beautiful Valley with all the opportunities it offers.

We are more than holding up positively because people recognise more than ever the importance of what happens here. I have heard this first hand at Admissions events all over the UK and the world, not only from prospective parents but from OAs and others.

Like many schools, however, we are also increasingly aware that philanthropy and fundraising will become a more important part of sustaining excellence in the years ahead. Independent schools have historically relied almost entirely on fee income, but the landscape is changing rapidly.

We are acutely conscious that parents already make enormous sacrifices to send their children here, and we never take that commitment lightly. But I would simply invite parents, alumni, and friends of the school to consider, where possible, whether they might in future support our wider ambitions — particularly in areas such as bursaries which allow us to offer opportunities to pupils who would otherwise never experience this wonderful Benedictine education. This is to support us in 10-15 years, so we ensure the school is in good health as we look further ahead to our 250th anniversary in 2052.

As ever, this year we lose members of staff whom I would like to give thanks to for their hard work for our pupils. In January, Will James left us after over 10 years' service, most latterly as Head of Sport, and this summer we will lose Mike Slingsby who, although not in continuous service, has worked for us since 2009.

Harriet Langdale will leave her role as Director of Admissions, Marketing and Communications after 7 years to return home to the south. Having travelled the world with her over the last 2 years and knowing her before she joined the College staff as Housemaster to two of her boys, I must say I am losing a friend. Everyone who knows her, appreciates how much she truly cares for the College. When times were tough, Harriet's tenacity and belief in our education helped the leadership team to get through some challenging times – her communication skills and contacts helped us more than most will know. She will stay connected in a different role with us.

I would like to take a moment to mention two other members of staff. On New Year's Eve our community was rocked by an accident involving Ali Rogerson and her daughter, Izzy, who is also an OA. Ali is a deeply private person, never one for the limelight, much appreciated by those she teaches and those she tutors and all staff who work with her. That some of her first thoughts after the accident were for her pupils and the College says it all. It was great to have her as part of Exhibition yesterday evening and we look forward to her coming back after half-term.

The final member of staff I would like to mention is Fr Henry Wansborough.

I am personally very grateful to Henry for his support of me in some academic studies I am doing but it is for his service and membership of the schola for which I would like to honour him today. The Schola was formed in 1969 and Fr Henry was a founding member, which in his words, makes it a decent term of service. After 57 years as a member he will sing his last song with the schola cantorum this academic year. I think a round of applause is the least we can do for this feat.

Thank you all for your support of the school this year. Thank you to our staff for their extraordinary dedication. Thank you to parents for your trust and partnership. And thank you to our pupils, who remain the reason for all that we do. Particular thanks to our Heads of School this year, Hannah, James, Hattie and Kofi. You have been brilliant. To Hannah Pomroy and Ali Gardiner for the smooth running of Exhibition – seamless and calm as ever.

I wish our leavers well; some have been here for 15 years, some have now actually finished their studies. You leave us as members of the Ampleforth Society and as members with a lifelong, global network of support. The Valley will miss you all and be ready to welcome you back.