

EXHIBITION SPEECH: 'GRACE'

GRATITUDE

RECONCILIATION

ACCEPTANCE

COMMUNITY

ENCOUNTER

Good morning. Most of you will have no idea who I am. Those of you who do may well be wondering why Mr Mutton has asked me to speak this morning. Well, me too! I am not famous, obviously, nor I am successful by any common standards, and I cannot offer you any clues as to how you might achieve either fame or success. Instead, I offer you the simple acronym GRACE. G for gratitude, R for reconciliation, A for Acceptance, C for Community and E for Encounter.

It has been said that an Ampleforth education prepares you for death not life. The best preparation for death is the way you choose to live. I am an Oblate of the Ampleforth monastic community. I have promised to try and live according to the Rule of St Benedict for the rest of my life. I live a Benedictine life as do ALL of you who are at school here. I *chose* this life. Most of you have had this life chosen for you, but you do choose the extent to which you participate in that life. I address this question particularly to the leavers; what sort of life will you choose now?

A few members of the Upper 6th told me recently that the best things about Ampleforth were community, friendships, being accepted for who you are and welcome or hospitality (a great Benedictine attribute). To take that experience

of life at Ampleforth with you as you leave, I offer you again GRACE (gratitude, reconciliation, acceptance, community and encounter).

Gratitude

It matters to spend a bit of time every day thanking God for all that I have so that I am more God-facing rather than me-facing. And it reminds me that all I have is a gift. St Paul says in his letter to the Thessalonians: 'give thanks in all circumstances' (1 Thess 5:17). The 'all circumstances' is important; however difficult things are, I have always found there is something for which to be thankful, not least God himself.

Reconciliation

It makes such a difference, does it not, when others are forgiving and welcoming towards us, when we are reconciled with others? Jesus tells us that we must forgive not just 7 but 77 times. How often do I need to be forgiven by others and indeed God? We pray daily in the Our Father; 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'. If we are forgiving then we ARE loving our neighbour, as Jesus told us we must.

What about Acceptance?

You may know that the longest chapter of the Rule, Chapter 7, is concerned with humility. Humility is absolutely not about abasement. It is about not only accepting our own strengths and weaknesses, but everyone else's too. We celebrate today many achievements, and so we should, but if you are not receiving a particular prize today, try not to mind too much. St John Henry Newman said: "I (you) am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons." St Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians: "You are the body of Christ. Each one of you is a part of it." Each one of you is a part of it. If you can

remember that and it will help you not to feel in competition with others, (which is exhausting and dispiriting), not to feel that you are somehow less. You are not. But, nor are they!

Community

You live here in one place in a community which has a habit of prayer and service. That habit of prayer and service encourages acceptance, forgiveness or reconciliation, friendship. You live a Benedictine life. As you leave the valley, try to begin and end your day with prayer, however short; you will find that you are like the house built on rock when the going gets tough. And I urge you to find a community to support and encourage you; a prayer or lectio group, a parish. It is hard going it alone which is why St Benedict made much of the importance of a community life in the Rule. To borrow a political slogan, we ARE better together.

So now to the final letter of GRACE: Encounter

The College's mission statement, as you will all know very well, includes the words 'to discover the value and purpose of life by entering into a transforming encounter with Christ'. We encounter Christ when we are alone with him, in each other, in our friendships, in scripture, in the sacraments. Don't neglect those opportunities for encounter. Jesus says in St John's Gospel "I have called you friends" (John 15:15). There is no greater friend than Jesus, but as with all friendships, we need to talk to him, to spend time with him. St James says: 'draw near to God and he will draw near to you.' He will always respond but he will not force himself upon you because what kind of friend does that? The better you get to know Jesus the easier gratitude, forgiveness and acceptance becomes and easier still (but still not easy!) with the support of a community.

The Benedictine motto is 'pax inter spinas', peace amongst thorns. I hope you will all have very happy lives but difficulties, thorns, will prick you periodically. You, like me, will both want and need resilience. Build that resilience by keeping your habit of prayer.

8 months ago I was diagnosed out of the blue with breast cancer. I think I was saying my 58th Hail Mary when eventually I fell asleep the first night after my diagnosis. Since then, I have lost no sleep over it. I don't think I fear death, but I suppose I won't know until that moment arrives but I really do fear losing my faith. I have kept on praying, pretty doggedly at times, and many others have been praying for me. I have found both peace and joy despite this rather sharp thorn. Keep on praying and you will too. Peace and joy are a foretaste of eternal life and they really do make the bad stuff not so bad.

Grace: gratitude, reconciliation, acceptance, community and encounter.

I will finish with the collect, the prayer, for the Feast of St Benedict celebrated by the whole church on 11th July each year:

O God, who made the Abbot St Benedict an outstanding master in the school of divine service, grant, we pray, that putting nothing before love of you, we may hasten with a loving heart in the way of your commands.

Martha Byrne Hill

Exhibition, May 2026