

## **St Christopher Centenary Addresss**

# **It is only a School**

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"It is only a School" I remember my father saying this to me in a mixture of exasperation and fascination. He never really 'got' St Chris and my many friends who he met could never explain it to him. He used to say that we had a stronger Old School Tie than anywhere else – we used to point out that there wasn't one. There was a uniform then, but none of us wore it.

He was right of course, but his throw-away put down begs so many other questions. What do you mean by a school? How many different sorts of school are there? What is special about this one?

Any sensible school spends most of its time thinking about immediate problems –things one can group under the heading of how do we make this into a better version of itself, handling current problems. There others that raise the question of what is it about this school that is different and special. Our Centenary is a time when we cannot avoid the pleasure of talking about what it is that makes it special.

Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* famously begins "All happy families are alike, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Schools are not like families, or at least this one isn't. It is very happy in its own distinctive way and this is what makes it so special for me. But how do you put your finger on what matters about that different way?

First we must acknowledge that the things that are distinctive change. When I came here it was a big thing for me to know that I would not be caned. It was routine in other schools and we hated it. Now other schools have all come round and seen the sense in non-

violence, mostly before it became illegal. So one advantage has been lost because others have followed us down what we saw as being our distinctive progressive path. There are other things – there is a lot more informality generally in society and we are less unusual on that account.

In the other direction, I was not much impressed by the buildings and playing fields when I came – I had never seen a school without them. Now many others have sold off their grounds. Our buildings and setting have become highly prized. So we have benefited from others going backwards.

We had plenty of other things to point to when arguing with my father. Of course there was calling people by first names and wearing our own clothes. Actually a lot of teachers in my time asked us to call them Mr, Mrs or Miss – Ms had not yet invented herself – and we were very happy to respect their wishes. However much of the rest of society has followed: for example in my own firm of lawyers, we all used to call the seniors and partners Mr or Sir – there were no women in senior roles - and now everyone is on first name terms. I expect it will spread to other schools. Self-governing School and Council Meetings are wonderful things, but the case for St Chris will not be diminished by other schools adopting them. We would be foolish to see it as a defeat when others admit we are right and copy our way of doing things.

I do not mean to belittle those talismans when I say that I do not think they are the core. I say that each one is better seen as a little detail something that contributes to the whole, part of what makes us distinctive, without being the crux of what really unites and defines St Chris.

I say there are two more important linked things that are the core and I hope you will all recognise them.

First, we all recognise that the point of a child is only secondarily to grow up and move on. Primarily the point of a child is to be a child, to be the most fulfilled 5 or 7 year old, or 10 year old or 18 year old that they can be. We know that there are some things that you can only do at each stage. If you miss out on getting all you can out of being a 7 year old you cannot go back and do it again. Sometimes it is very hard to learn the things you should have learned then and even. Successful growing up is built on a successful childhood and we believe that means being a happy child. I would not pretend that the rest of the world is not catching on – just look at photographs of people from before the war and notice how everyone tried to look

older than they were. But I think we are still well ahead in the way we recognise the precious nature of childhood.

Linked to that is a respect for the individual child at each stage in their evolution. You 7 year olds are just as important as the 18 year olds. Of course we come to school to make mistakes to try things out and find out when they are wrong. That is partly how we learn and some of us are still doing it. But when you get challenged at St Chris it is a bit gentler than other places and people tolerate the individual and the eccentric. Our distinctive School is built on a celebration of the children who make up our community.

There is nothing soft or soppy about this. It can be easier to be told to sit still and speak when you are spoken to. To be told what to say and think. It is because we take each other seriously that we listen to what each other say. It is because we care what people say that we tell them when we think they are talking tosh. It is because we are used to other people taking us seriously and listening to us that we learn – slowly but I hope not too painfully – to think about what we are saying.

So yes of course it is only a school. It is only a wonderful school. Doing its own special different thing as well as it can depends upon the efforts of all of you to do your best to enjoy yourselves, to challenge each other to be the most successful and fulfilled children that you can be. I believe passionately that that is how you will each build the foundations of a successful adult life and each of you will contribute by making your experience of St Chris something that you will treasure for the rest of your lives.