

## What we can learn from Merchant Taylors' Company

I have a question for you this morning: is competition a good thing? I bet you take the idea of competition for granted. We have placed competition at the heart of our society and our economic system. However, as a purpose of assemblies is to make us think and to challenge assumptions, I am going to propose a contrarian view this morning and suggest that competition is not necessarily a good thing and there is a better way to live. Further, that better way can be taught to us by our own livery company, Merchant Taylors' Company.

Competition is woven into the fabric of our society. Two important thinkers perhaps influenced its importance: Thomas Hobbes and Charles Darwin. The great philosopher Hobbes set out his ideas of human behaviour in his book *Leviathan*. In it, he argued that without a powerful controlling political force, like a king, human beings would inevitably compete with each other destructively. Unless peace is forcibly imposed on us, Hobbes described the natural state of humanity as 'a warre of every man against every man.' The lives of human beings would degenerate and become 'nasty, brutish and short'. It is surely no coincidence that this thought occurred to Hobbes just after the English Civil War. The context in which ideas appear is important.

Similarly, Charles Darwin's ideas on evolution and 'the survival of the fittest' are an undoubted insight into Biology and the process of natural selection. They are also the product of a time in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that saw vicious unregulated exploitation in the workforce. The weakest were economic units to be used and cast aside by the stronger.

Both Hobbes and Darwin share the idea that competition is inevitable. Hobbes thought it is a problem to be controlled; Darwin thought it drove development. Darwin's opinion currently rules the roost, and has been adopted as an ethic for behaviour as well as scientific theory. Our culture embraces competition in every aspects of life. It drives business; arguably, social media is a vast merry-go-round of competitive posting. Competition is even at the heart of your experience of school. Pupils compete to get into the best schools and they compete to achieve the highest grades. We accept it almost without question. However, to return to the question we began with - *should* we accept competition as both good and inevitable?

Another way that competition is central to our society is that it is at the heart of Capitalism. Capitalism is generally accepted, again almost without question, as the best way to structure a society. But is it? Anyone who has played the board game Monopoly knows that unfettered business competition tends to destroy smaller companies and create monopolies. You can visit any high street in any town in the UK - it will contain roughly the same huge brands, like Sainsbury's, Boots, B&Q and the like. These shopping titans drove small family firms out of business. And now those huge brands are in the process of being driven out of business themselves by Internet monoliths like Amazon. Ironically, the free choice offered by Capitalistic competition soon descends into no choice at all.

Too often now, the Capitalist, competitive world of work is defined in terms of a battle between workers and bosses – the exploited and the oppressor, the union and the owner. A world of zero-sum competition, where someone gets ahead at the expense of another, where resentment breeds social distrust. Where grudges are held and levelling up is demanded.

However, we are often told that there is no alternative way of running our society than competition and Capitalism. I doubt many in the room are attracted to Communism or its baby brother Socialism. Who would want to try Anarchism, where there are no rules at all? We certainly cannot go back to Feudalism.

Does that leave us with only Capitalism, with this brutal competition at its heart? Merchant Taylors' Company would say no – there is another way. Mutualism. Mutualism is the idea that to create social well-being we should look after each other rather than compete with each other.

To understand the idea better, let us go back to the Middle Ages. Society then did not encourage competitive growth - this was a time when most lives were not defined by the pursuit of wealth. Trying to better yourself was considered sinful, and in any case was almost impossible. Instead of incessant competition, people tended to look after each other. You needed your neighbours to survive, and they needed you.

The Middle Ages was a religious time: people remembered the maxim that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich man to go to Heaven, and that Jesus and his disciples lived lives of poverty.

This was the time when Merchant Taylors' Company and other livery companies like it came into existence. They formed around the idea of mutual support, setting a fair price for their work and promoting the common good. Each Guild or Company defined its own craft. Merchant Taylors made clothes, tents and the padding under armour. As the Companies grew, they invented the idea that paid work should be creative, pursue high quality, be offered at fixed fair prices, and not be exploitative. Underpinning it all was the idea that each craftsman should look after his fellow man. Money went into the common pot, where it paid for wonderful feasts to share, beautiful halls to gather in and charitable work for those in society who needed it. It also paid for our school.

Yes, they also made money for themselves and some became extraordinarily rich. Nevertheless, they didn't do so through competition and it wasn't remotely like Capitalism.

Since the Middle Ages and the birth of the Guilds and livery companies, centuries have passed. We have gone through religious wars, and the beginnings of our modern times. We have seen an industrial revolution shape the world and introduce the glory and degradation of the Victorian era, with all its unfettered competition and capitalism. We have seen the pendulum swing back with the rejection of those values by the followers of Karl Marx's, and the battle of ideologies that characterised the Twentieth Century.

However, before and beyond it all, there is still a powerful Mutualist message from the Middle Ages, when Guilds and Companies were first conceived. Theirs was not a world that was founded upon competition; instead it was founded upon mutual support. It was a world where there was no strife between union and management because both were on the same team, running their affairs for the benefit of all. Moreover, with the benevolence this generates, the Guilds and Companies could look outwards, and ask what they could do for the betterment of others. Charitable work was built into the essence of their idea of themselves.

Charity comes from the Latin word 'caritas', which rather brilliantly means three things: 'dearness', 'high price' and 'love'. The combination of the three was the financial and social success of the Company. Because of the first two, they could act upon the third. And their act is us. We are the work they set in motion.

So, whatever you might think of my contrarian view on competition and capitalism, and my superficial gallop through history, here is a thought that we might all decide to take away from this assembly.

There are other ways to structure society than one based upon people preying on each other. There is another way, where we can bond together in support of each other. That way was born centuries ago, but it has found a path through the years to our own times. With its embrace of Mutualism, Merchant Taylors' Company planted a tree – its fruit is the school we are all take pride in. Let us not be capitalists, or communists, or socialists or any other kind of 'ist' or 'ism'. Let us instead be guildsmen.