

First Assembly – September 2020

Welcome back – I said I'd see you soon. Though I must say, I thought it would be sooner.

I hope that you had a great summer. I also hope that you feel ready to seize every opportunity in the year ahead. As you know, there have been some changes to make the school as safe as possible for you and your teachers. However, although things are slightly different, the principles remain the same. You can anticipate academic challenge, pastoral support, high expectation and a growing extracurricular provision. I do not want us to approach the year ahead in the spirit of feeling sad about what we cannot do. I want us to find new ways to do what we want, and find fresh opportunities in our new circumstances. I want us to be positive.

I also want us to be kind. These are unusual times, and it is stressful enough to start a new academic year without additional worries. The school is finding its feet and applying a host of new measures. We are all going to make some mistakes in the weeks ahead. So we need to cut each other a little slack. We need to find ways to be kind. As the Dalai Llama said, 'Whenever possible, be kind to each other. It is always possible.'

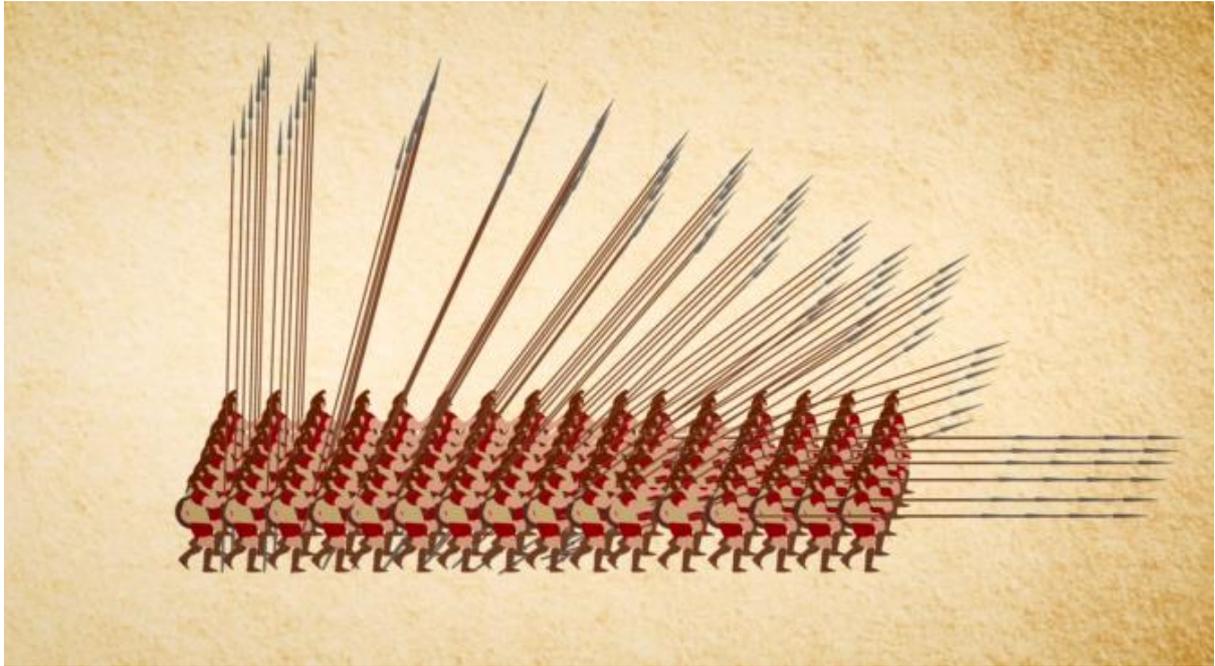
So the first two words to take into your heart this morning are positivity and kindness. But there is a third, and I would like to introduce this to you in a circuitous route by reminding you of an extraordinary group of warriors: the Spartans. They flourished in ancient Greece, and were in every way the opposite of the culture of Athens. The Athenians were people of rhetoric, drama and philosophy.

They were steeped in words and language. The Spartans were not. The part of Greece they lived in was called Laconia. From it we get the English word laconic. It means to speak shortly and bluntly. Probably the most famous story of the ancient Spartans is that of King Leonidas and the 300 Spartans who fought a Persian army at Thermopylae - the Hot Gates. Facing an army of many hundreds of thousands, the 300 fought the Persians to a standstill. After days of battle, they were betrayed and found themselves surrounded. Darius, the Persian king, called upon the Spartans to surrender. He told them that he would spare them if they gave up their weapons. King Leonidas replied, 'Molon labe.' That means, 'Come and take them.' The Spartans fought on to the last man, and in their sacrifice won undying glory.



How could such a small number of soldiers hold off an army so much greater than itself?

It is true that the Spartans were trained from birth to be outstanding warriors, but the real answer lay in the way the Spartans fought. They fought as a phalanx, lines of soldiers tightly packed together, linking their shields to form a protective wall. Working as a single unit, the phalanx provided superb protection for each warrior, and synchronised spear thrusts were a deadly threat to any attacker.



Advancing or retreating in unison, the phalanx provided both defensive wall and an almost unstoppable attack. The phalanx was dependent on the effective use of the Spartan shield, called an *aspis*.



It was clad in bronze and was revered in the Spartan culture. Each warrior was expected to protect his shield with his life and it represented his identity as a warrior. When a Spartan mother sent her son off to war, she said this, 'Return with your shield, or on it.' In other words, come back victorious or be brought back as a dead body upon your own shield.

Why was the shield so important? Because the strength of the phalanx depended upon the use of the shield. It was designed to protect the man to your left in the phalanx. Each warrior guarded the health

and well-being of the person next to them. Each could fight with confidence and freedom because each knew that their blind spots and vulnerabilities were covered by their fellow warrior.

One Spartan king, speaking about the importance of the shield, said this, ‘the other armours they put on for their own protection, but the shield for the common good of the whole line.’ Commanders would arrange it so that family members and friends stood side-by-side in the lines of the phalanx. If any were injured on the front line, the next man behind would step up and take their place. Above all, the integrity of the formation was protected at all costs. If at any point the organisation of the phalanx broke down, none of the warriors within it had much chance of surviving the battle.

This style of fighting outlived the battle formations of the Spartans. It was the foundation of the success of the Roman legions. It survived until the Battle of Hastings, when King Harold’s House Carles formed a shield wall around him on top of Senlac Hill. When William the Conqueror’s Norman troops broke the shield wall, they knew that victory was theirs.



I hope all this is interesting, but why should I take this moment at the start of this year to remind you of an ancient fighting style? I wonder if you have already understood my metaphor. Today we are not facing half a million Persians at the Hot Gates, or hoping to fend off a Norman invasion. Our fight is against a virus. That virus does not have the capacity to know or care about us. However, our success against it will depend upon our ability to know and care about each other. We will prevail by looking after those around us. When we wear a mask, we do not do it to protect ourselves. We do it to protect those beside us. The one-way system will be a frustration, but we do it to protect those who walk beside us. The bubble system and our new ways of operating may irritate, but we do it to protect those who work beside us. Your shield defends the man to your left, and the phalanx holds.



So my message this morning is that we have to fight as a team. We have to hold the integrity of the phalanx.

My first word this morning was positivity - let's look forward in hope and seize every opportunity the year ahead presents. My second word was kindness - let's look after each other and make sure that each of us is as strong and as happy as we can be. My last word is solidarity. We have to be strong together as a team, working for others, ensuring that each of us serves the good of us all.

A new year lies before us, gentlemen. May it be one of great happiness and great success.