

First Assembly 2022

Welcome back! It's good to see you all, meeting up again, looking forward to what the year ahead holds and planning for the future. We have a whole year of teaching and learning ahead of us. How should we approach it? The famous Greek philosopher Plato wrote that the art of teaching and the pupil's desire for learning are two very different things. Without the energy of the pupils, the teacher's job was impossible.

Plato said that the good teacher did his (or her) best to strike that spark of desire to learn which would turn into a flame. Success was not guaranteed: Plato had a brilliant turn of phrase – he said he knew students who preferred a *suntan* education (his actual words). A *suntan* education involves turning over now and again till lightly educated on both sides.

As for the art of teaching, another from the Classical world, the orator and teacher Quintilian (c. AD 35-100) summed it up beautifully (please ignore his casual sexism that focuses only on men): 'The teacher must have no vices himself nor tolerate them in others. He must not be strict and humourless, or free-and-easy and overfamiliar: the one breeds hate, the other contempt. His conversation must concentrate on what is good and honourable; the more sound advice he gives, the less he will need to tell the pupils off... He must happily answer questions, and question those who remain silent. In praising his pupils' work, he must neither hold back praise or over-compliment: the one will put the pupils off, the other make them relax too much. Quintilian finished by saying that '...pupils who are taught properly love and respect their teacher: it is impossible to say how much more willingly we copy those whom we like.'

Those words from the ancient world are a fine guide for the shiny new year ahead of us. As pupils, don't seek a '*suntan* education', and in return the teachers will try to live up to the advice of Quintilian.

We will want the coming year to be full of successes, but let's remind ourselves that we should not pursue success as an end in itself. Success is what happens when you get the really important things right. Success is just a by-product of your good character, your focused energy and your enthusiasm. When we nurture joy, love, kindness, empathy, and compassion success will take care of itself. By the way, congratulations to the L6th, who gave us the best GCSE grades the school has ever had – more than 93% A*/A grades. Good job!

How shall we pursue that goal in the new academic year ahead of us? Everyone will have their own goals. Some will want to make a great start at their new school. Some will want to build towards great GCSE or A level grades, some will be thinking about sport, some about other clubs and activities. I hope all of you will be looking forward to building friendships. May I add something to the list? I would like to highlight an important initiative that I mentioned in my final assembly last year. I said then that, properly considered, schools were like factories – but an unusual factory in that what we make here is not objects, but the future. We have just experienced a summer of broiling heat and drought. Earlier this month, a third of Pakistan was flooded. There is an obvious climate crisis underway. If we are going to do something positive with regard to the climate, we need to be the change we want to see. We are going to have to do it ourselves.

Sustainability is clearly a topic of the moment. The club is very active and the school wishes to meet their enthusiasm. We now have a governor with a specific focus upon sustainability. We have installed electric charge points at school. We reconfigured the school's hot water system over the summer to save energy. Further, all of the school's waste goes to a Biofuel site, so we are a zero waste site. All cooking oil is made into biofuel, and all waste food is composted. This is good, but we can do more and are planning to do more.

I won't pretend that there are also practical reasons to try to be more sustainable. This is going to be a difficult winter and we all face increased expenses. Inflation is running high, especially in the costs of food and energy. If we do nothing differently to last year and use as much energy as we did, we will spend around £900,000 more. That's a money that we cannot spend on giving you the opportunities we would wish. The school is strong and is in a good financial position – nothing to worry about there – but clearly we would all benefit from being sensible, especially if we are helping the planet at the same time.

So, we must change our ways. It will require commitment from us all. We will be asking you to make your personal pledge to do your bit. We will promote shared endeavour through tutor groups and Houses. We will also ask you to think and to share your ideas on what the school as a whole can do better and differently.

Over the course of the year, we will report regularly on progress and measure our performance against last year. It will be good to see exactly what impact we are having. Further, we will directly involve the sustainability group to provide us with pupil leadership. We want you to be at the heart of what we do.

Our goals, in addition to lowering energy use, will be to reduce food waste. Teachers are part of the programme too – the school will continue to minimise costs, for example in printing, use of stationary and other wastage.

One further thing. This year, I would like us to present ourselves as smartly as possible, both in terms of how we look and how we behave. Personal presentation is important - how we look sends a message about how serious we are about what we do. Now that we are back in school as usual and the Covid disruption is long past, we need to put slackness behind us: we will be smart and take pride in our appearance. In terms of behaviour, I expect you behave as the gentlemen you are. This school is well-known for its kindness and courtesy – that is a tradition we will continue to take seriously.

Years ago, we chose five words to characterise how we go about things at here at Merchant Taylors'. Our own words are Innovation, Courage, Confidence, Inspiration and Joy. I am so pleased they permeate everything we do. Let's keep them at the heart of our actions in this new academic year.

Thank you for your attention – have a great year.