

Whole School Sermon Sunday 18th September 2011

Good morning. It's a great pleasure to welcome so many new parents and their children to Chapel, and to see the whole school brought together for this service of Holy Communion to celebrate the start of the school year. It gives me particular pleasure to have the opportunity to preach today, before my first ascent of the Wrekin with the school. This is, perhaps, the final part of my initiation into the school, as it is for some of you. I hope, though, that the other newcomers among you already feel very much part of Wrekin College, as I do, and have received as warm a welcome to the school community as my family and I have done.

One of my daughter Daphne's favourite films is 'The Sound of Music'. I'm sure most of you will know the famous film version and its music, or indeed the West End stage show. But in case you don't, it's essentially a film about how you find happiness – and how happiness can sometimes emerge from the most unexpected situations. Maria, a young novice nun, finds – and gives – love and happiness to a widowed naval captain and his seven children, transforming the family through her warm personality and musical skills.

The film begins and ends with the mountains of Austria. The famous opening sequence features Maria singing 'The hills are alive with the sound of music' as the camera swoops and swirls around her, against the backdrop of the spectacular Alpine landscape – and the ending shows the family escaping to freedom with a night-time dash across those very same mountains.

Now why should I begin with a description of a Hollywood musical? Partly because the film – clichéd as it has become – exemplifies much that is good about human nature – but mainly, of course, because it begins and ends with the ascent of a mountain – something we're all going to do later today.

A mountain? I hear you ask. Is the Wrekin really a mountain? Well, according to local historian R E Davies, whose Handbook to the Wrekin was published in 1895, the Wrekin is 'considered to be the highest mountain in Europe in proportion to its base...'. I'm not entirely sure whether that analysis stands up to scrutiny, but according to the patriotic Mr Davies, those who might have guessed at Mont Blanc or the Matterhorn are wrong. Let's stick to his story: we're climbing the highest mountain in Europe this afternoon. Make sure you tell your friends.

So why do we climb the Wrekin every year, come rain or shine?

Well, there are a number of answers to that question.

Firstly: it's a school tradition. Traditions are important in schools like Wrekin College. Much has changed at Wrekin since its foundation in 1880 – the world is a completely different place today, and the school reflects those changes – but it's important to hold fast to certain traditions, particularly if they've been tested by time and not found wanting. The school is a modern establishment but its values and ethos can be traced back clearly to its founder's aims and objectives. That's something for us to take pride in.

Secondly: the ascent of the Wrekin is an event that binds us all together. A whole school activity, like this chapel service and this afternoon's walk, reinforces the fact that we're part of a close community. Collective activities – such as team sports, orchestral playing and theatrical performances – are an important part of the Wrekin experience. Learning to work together and share achievements is a valuable – indeed a vital – part of our education here. Sharing this expedition at the start of the term reminds us that we're all part of the Wrekin family – and that we owe a lot to each other, and have a responsibility to each other as well.

Thirdly: the ascent is a rite of passage. I will never forget today – and I bet those of you who are new like me won't either. Becoming part of this school – identifying yourself as a Wrekinian – is part of why boys and girls come here. You're not a real Wrekinian, apparently, until you've climbed the Wrekin. Most schools would claim that they have a unique identity, but I think the sense of identity among Wrekinians is particularly strong.

After I was appointed, several Old Wrekinians wrote or spoke to me, to tell me what being a Wrekinian meant to them. Most of them said very much the same thing. Being a Wrekinian means being kind, honest, tolerant and supportive of others. It means discovering what you're good at, among the many opportunities available to you here, and finding your own way to shine. It means being ambitious in everything you do. I'd like to add one more characteristic of my own: being a Wrekinian means recognising what a great privilege it is to have a Wrekin education, and doing your best to live up to it. I hope you will all reflect on these Wrekinian strengths as we climb our mountain today.

Fourthly: climbing up above the plain offers a different perspective. Once you get to the top of the Wrekin you can see, on a clear day, for miles in every direction. You will have a 360 degree sweep of the country – and what country it is. The Handbook to the Wrekin claims that it's possible to see 17 counties from the summit. And certainly when my family and I went up it for the first time before the start of term the impact was breath-taking.

But the change of perspective is not just about what you can see. It's also about a different way of looking at yourself in relation to the world around you. Up on the Wrekin, with only the heavens above you and the world beneath, you will have, like Maria in the Sound of Music, a real sense of freedom, of escape from your workaday cares and of a broader outlook on life.

The school routine can sometimes be so preoccupying that it's hard to hold onto a proper sense of perspective – to remember what really matters in life, and to pay attention to the bigger picture. Today is an opportunity to draw breath after the first week and a half of term, to survey the scenery, and to descend refreshed and ready to throw ourselves into this school year.

Fifthly: climbing every mountain, as Maria sings in the opening sequence of The Sound of Music, is all about challenging yourself. Maria is searching for her dream – and the trek up the mountain symbolises the effort she's prepared to make to get what she wants from life. Ascending the Wrekin symbolises that same commitment for each of us: to make the most of our individual talents and skills so that we can become the kind of person we want to be. It may not be easy – there will be difficulties along the way – but with energy, drive, enthusiasm and commitment you will all arrive at the top, ready to enjoy the view – and see the great distance you have travelled since you set out.

And finally, hills and mountains have a great symbolic significance for us all, above and beyond The Sound of Music or the Wrekin. Their great height, and their relative permanence by comparison with the short span of human existence, is humbling to us. But it also provides us with a sense of the grandeur of God's creation which offers comfort, consolation and hope in a world which is difficult and demanding – and we cannot live well without hope. Let me quote from Psalm 121 – one of my favourites. 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh even from the Lord, who hath made heaven and earth.'

The source of our being – the God who made heaven and earth – is not to be found only amongst the hills, of course, any more than He is only to be found in Chapel. He is within us and in all the world around us. But nonetheless, there is something powerfully evocative, to my mind, about a God who dwells in the mountain tops – both mysterious and familiar, inscrutable and understood – a God whose goodness and love shelters those who live in the shadow of the hills and mountains, including all of us at Wrekin College, now and forever. Let us, above all, reflect on that sense of blessing and protection this afternoon, as we celebrate the splendour of our local landscape, and our shared venture here at Wrekin.

Richard Pleming
Headmaster