

What is Success? – Charter Day Address, 15 March 2008

– Rev Alex Aldous, OB

Lord Mayor, Chairman of Governors, Headmaster, distinguished guests, Old Boys, parents, staff and pupils of Bristol Grammar School, I count it a great honour to be here with you on this special day celebrating the life of the School and giving thanks for its roots and its fruits. My first memory of this service was when I was eleven years old and having to take all my Rugby kit down to the Cathedral and stowing it under my chair ready to play against St Brendan's School straight afterwards. I found that I had lost my boots – it clouded the whole day: not a success! In fact the fixture against St Brendan's (now, I believe, a Sixth-form College) was not a success: it was stopped for ever when I was in the Sixth Form after our First XV prop forward was head-butted ten minutes into the game by his opposite number who came out with our man's teeth in his forehead and looking like a deranged rhino!

I'd like to ask you a question: are you a success? You in the First, Second, Fourth, Sixth Forms -- are you a success? Head of Maths, Headmaster, Chairman of Governors, Lord Mayor – are you a success? Is Bristol Grammar School? Am I?

At certain times of the year it might seem that life is just about proving yourself on paper to go through the next academic hurdle, and looking at last Saturday's Educational pull-out I noticed that BGS came out a highly commendable 90th in the 'A' Level league table for Independent Schools – in that you most certainly are a success.

Is success about getting noticed by the sports staff so that you can earn your way into the Firsts at Rugby, hockey, netball or the many different sports that are offered at BGS? Is it about getting your lines right and putting on a stunning performance in your AS or A2 plays at the beginning of April? Is success about looking good enough to catch the eye of a particular guy or girl whom you fancy?

'Success.com' on the web claims to be the world leader in personal development, success and self-help and it advertises its success classic: 'Think and grow rich.' Success for many in our world is simply measured by the riches and status that one acquires, and how quickly one can attain them, and it seems

from adverts I have heard on the radio even this week that ‘learning means earning.’

For any of you who has seen the latest Oscar-winning film *There Will be Blood*, the concept of success is shown very powerfully by Daniel Day-Lewis, as Daniel Plainview, as something that involves maximising potential at the expense of everything and everyone else: discovering oil on his land, he ruthlessly mines it with an insatiable greed, arrogance and hatred of others, and ends by saying: ‘I despise success in others.’ The ego is too big to share success with others – how sad!

In our Bible reading we heard of striving and determination to be a success: ‘I press on toward the mark, the goal for the prize.’ And then he spells out what that prize is: ‘the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.’ It is a striving not to do and acquire, and be rich (not that St Paul criticises these things in themselves), no, it is a striving to be the person God has created us to be, to revel in our own uniqueness and explore that God-given potential to the full.

As we, in this service, pause in this time-ridden House of God and look back over the School’s history -- and indeed, the history of education and civilisation in the West -- it pays to remind ourselves that our roots lie in the Christian belief that we are born to be co-creators with God: to work with Him for His glory in discovering the wonders of the world, to be *bricoleurs* and create beauty of the raw stuff of life, to bring benefit to others and to have true dominion over creation for the good of nature and of society.

(I am delighted to see on the BGS website, that ‘caring for others’ takes a prominent place in the ethos of the School: that, to me is success.)

The sad thing is that we as a nation have left our Christian roots and made ourselves to be gods, and so the striving for success without a sense of the eternal and the spiritual so often is defined only by self-glory, riches and status, and leaves no room for being a loving neighbour or caring classmate, and neither does it leave room for failure.

On *Songs of Praise* a few weeks after the tsunami had hit Asia, one of my relatives through marriage and an Old Bristolian, Jeremy Clewett (who works for TEAR Fund in Asia) was interviewed and described how he and his wife had to flee for their lives when the disaster struck, and she naked with nothing to wrap herself with, and they were left with nothing The comment later on

the programme from the rector of the Iona Community in Scotland was: ‘*maybe you’re not human until you have faced up to things not being right in the world.*’

It is not that we will failure to be, or dumb down success in whatever area, but *real* success in you and me is about ‘becoming, and growing;’ and failure and being without what we’ve come to expect may be the very pathway that God can use to make us successful human *beings*, and not just human *doings*.

Within our school motto ‘Ex Spinis Uvas’ -- ‘from thorns come grapes’ -- there lies the idea of the intermingling of success and pain, redemption and suffering, for it not only makes reference to our founding brothers Robert and Nicholas Thorne, from whom BGS has flourished as an establishment, but it also points also to how the path to success may unfold.

RW Moore, Headmaster at the beginning of the Second World War, in his parting words to the School before leaving for Harrow as Head, said this: ‘It is a witty motto, but it looks like a flouting of holy writ. Yet it is not. Strange things happen in the garden of the soul and in schools, which are, or should be, nurseries of souls. From our own very shortcomings’ – the failures and imperfections which we find in ourselves -- ‘God is able to give us new eyes and turn us to newness of living. So on the thorn-bushes of humans’ lives may bud and grow, unsuspected, the grapes of his goodness. With man it is impossible; with God, all things are possible.’

Are we as individuals, and as a School, prepared to be those who learn from taking risks, from making mistakes, from experiencing true failure and turning it into success and triumph, in our personal and family situations and in our lives together as a community?

At the age of fifteen, I found that a real challenge when the world seem to come crashing around me on opening up my ‘O’ Level results: I found that I had failed several. I remember the moment well – my father came up to my bedroom and sobbed with me, for he himself had known what failure had been before qualifying as a doctor. But it is out of these ‘thorny’ times that the grapes of humility and perseverance emerge, and most importantly a dependence on Someone Higher than ourselves; for true success, I have learnt, is in God’s strength alone.

Our last hymn stated: 'He who would valiant be 'gainst all disaster, let him in constancy follow the Master.' And what is the intention of such a person? To be a *pilgrim*; to be not the instant success-grabber, but one who journeys one step at a time (and sometimes with a *thorn* in the foot) towards the 'upward call of God.' As we tread into Holy week towards Easter Sunday, we see, first, our Saviour and Master who wears a crown of thorns, who was beaten and hung on a despised Roman cross. Where was success there? His school of followers had deserted him, his mission seemed in doubt and death was the result. But at the very end of those dark hours on Good Friday came the words: 'It is finished' -- 'I have succeeded.' In the darkest moment for Christ came the lightest moment for humankind – success for humanity in being offered spiritual life and the power of his resurrection which followed.

'Grapes from thorns,' 'resurrection from death,' 'triumph from tragedy.' If it is these higher values that we espouse as a School, hide them in our hearts as individuals and demonstrate them in our lives as a community, then we shall experience true success: the success in becoming truly human as the Divine intended, with all our God-given potential – in work, in sport, in the arts; in our relationships one with the other, in defending the weak, and in stamping out injustice. And it begins by responding to the One who says to each one of us: 'Come, follow Me'; for as RW Moore ended by saying: 'The thorns crowned the head of one whose blood is the wine of our eternal life.'

May you as a School go on being the success it has been, and go on from strength to strength in becoming the success you can be with God. Amen.