



Archbishop Tenison's

CHURCH OF ENGLAND HIGH SCHOOL

312th Founder's Day

Talk by

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Artemis II - A Good Metaphor

One of the most significant events of **this term** so far took place many thousands of miles away from here when the US spacecraft Artemis II took human beings further away from earth than they have ever been, on the other side of the moon, and gave us stunning pictures of both the moon and our own planet which we have never had before.

Having completed that orbit of the moon, Artemis II then had to re-enter the earth's atmosphere. This needed both the power, the "burn" of a rocket to get it through, and at the right angle, but also a powerful shield from the heat at that moment of transition – heat which had blown the mercifully unmanned Artemis I to nothing and which could do the same to these astronauts if that shield were not strong enough. That is why the scientists at NASA waited very anxiously for 6 minutes when Artemis II was out of contact whilst it made that transition, to see if the "burn" would work and the shield would hold.

The "burn" and the "shield" are **good metaphors** for what we need at any time of transition or change, such as that which we are approaching as a school over the next year and beyond, change which I, too, have before me, as I retire from my work here after 21 years as Headteacher of Archbishop Tenison's.

What, or who, can we rely on at such a time of change? What can be our "burn"? What can be our shield?



Paul and Timothy Being Strong

Paul, in our NT reading, was also anticipating a time of significant change, when the Christian faith would be passed on from the first generation of apostles and those who knew Jesus personally to those who were coming afterwards. In his second letter to Timothy he knows what he can rely on: the Christian Gospel of God's grace. Be strong, he says, in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

Paul knew what grace was, and why he could rely on it. Jesus who appeared to him on the road to Damascus had transformed him from proud Pharisee to humble Apostle, from violent persecutor to gentle preacher and teacher, from the man who held the coats at Stephen's stoning to the one who was imprisoned for his own faith. He knew from this that *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners* like him. He knew, as we do from John's Gospel, that *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life*. And he knew, as John also said in his first letter, that *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins*.

Timothy was to **be strong** in that grace by passing on that message faithfully. Paul had run the first leg of the relay race; Timothy had heard him speaking in front of many witnesses; he was now to entrust that message to reliable people who would teach others also. Teaching well the message entrusted to him: that was the way to become reliable.

Paul trusted in the **reliability** of this message to strengthen the fearful to endure hardship like brave soldiers, to please their commanding officer; to train the weak to run and win the crown; to energise the slack to work hard and get their share of the crop.

For Paul it is **open to any of us** to come to the foot of the Cross where sins are forgiven and guilt is cancelled; where the simple become wise and the rebellious become teachable; and where flaky people become steadfast.

Psalm 119 - Becoming Steadfast

A flaky person becoming **steadfast** is the whole story of the 22 stanzas of Psalm 119 (the longest Psalm). The Psalm is divided into two halves, before and after the crisis which happens at the midpoint between stanzas 11 and 12, as we shall see.

Our reading came from stanzas 10 to 13, and it is the gap between those stanzas where the psalmist endures his “6 minutes”, when the heat is greatest and the shield most needed, and it is highly uncertain whether he will come out the other side. Towards the end of the 11th stanza he says of his enemies that *They almost wiped me from the earth*. almost tells us how serious it was.

This psalmist has 4 panels in the shield which keeps him alive:

1. Understanding

The first panel is In Stanza 10 when he prays for **understanding to learn your commands**. It seems the wrong way round. Does not learning come before understanding? Not here. Because the psalmist understands who he is - *Your hands made me and formed me*, where his hope is, that God is faithful to him even in difficult times, about what he is here for as God’s servant and about what only God can teach him – compassion, humility, respect, integrity – this is why he is able to learn.

- Jesus says the same to Nicodemus: *no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again*.
- We know the same in our school: when we understand what we are here for, when we enter our lessons in the right frame of mind, that’s when we learn. Even as a headteacher it is the same: I have got better at doing the job when I understand better what my role is.
- It’s this understanding which Thomas Tenison had and those around him didn’t: that those ten poor boys and ten poor girls needed a school with high academic standards in a secure Christian context before they could learn anything else in life.

2. Hope

The second panel is In Stanza 11: I *have put my **hope in your word***.

Hope is what he trusts when all else is failing: His soul is faint, his eyes failing, his health gone – his body like a dried out wineskin – and his patience with God is running out; worse ... he is being humiliated and picked on – his enemies are out to finish him off; in an incredible assertion of hope against hope; when he otherwise would have given up, this hope keeps going: I have not forsaken your precepts – I have not given up on your promise.

- This is the hope Jesus expresses on the Cross in his cry “*It is finished*”, an earthquake tears the Temple curtain open from top to bottom, blowing open the only way into the very presence of God.
- This is the hope all of us need to get even the simplest task done, to push beyond the point where naturally we want to give up because we don't feel like it any more. “I've had enough”, we say, but we go on anyway!
- This is the hope which has sustained this school for 312 years – through many moments when it might have been finished – two World Wars, three different buildings, four Headteachers since 1952, each with their own challenges to work through. Even last year, when we made the film TENACIOUS TOGETHER there were moments I thought “this will never happen”.



3. Delight

Stanza 12 has the third panel: the reason for this hope. With hindsight he says: *If your law had not been **my delight**, I would have perished in my affliction.* Delight is the reason for hope, because hope relies on something beyond the immediate situation, in this case, the eternal, enduring, royal, dependable word of the living God who made all things by that word. Whereas hope is needed in the heat of the moment, delight goes back to the beginning of things. We have echoes here of Genesis 1 – *In the beginning God ...* and of John 1 – *In the beginning was the Word ...* of wisdom in Proverbs 8, there at the foundation of the world, and of Psalm 1, the gateway to all the psalms, *His delight is in the law of the LORD.*

- It is delight of the father in the prodigal son in Jesus' most famous parable which gives him the reason to wait for him in longing and hope.
- It is the reason why any one of us in the Minster today can become the strongest of learners – once we find the subject which gives us this delight.
- It is what makes Archbishop Tenison's such a great school – the interest of you, our teaching staff in your subjects, and the eagerness of you, our pupils and students to learn them.



4. Companionship

Stanza 13 adds one last panel: *your commands ... are **ever with me***: at his moment of deepest isolation this writer finds companionship in the presence of God with him through his word. This companionship is unique: *all day long*, it helps him navigate every one of his relationships with different people – enemies, teachers, elders; it makes him wise; it gives him understanding and insight beyond himself; it keeps him on the right track. Notice the link here between companionship and feet: *I have kept my feet from every evil path ... I have not departed from your laws ...* this companionship has kept me off the wrong path and kept me on the right path. It has also changed my tastes and appetites.

- In the New Testament this is the companionship Jesus promises his disciples as he sends them *another Counsellor to be with you for ever – the Spirit of Truth*.
- In school we know how much is changed by who our companions are. Paul has it this way: *Don't be deceived: bad company ruins good character*. Our best friends who keep our feet on the right track.
- Part of my story over 21 years here is good advice and wise counsel I have received from many people, keeping my feet in the right place. Some of you are here today.

Looking Ahead

So, what does this mean as we go into our 313th year: on whom can we **rely**? The evidence is that we have to rely on the right things and the right person if we want in our turn to become reliable people. For Paul, it is holding to the message that God, who said, “let light shine out of darkness”, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. This is what will make us reliable witnesses to that message, and reliable teachers of it.

For the psalmist it is that great **insight** that I have not departed from your laws, for yourself have taught me. The reliability that counts, which understands, hopes, delights and offers genuine companionship to others, is in the end something we can learn, from him who is our Lord and our Saviour as well as our Teacher.

Here in a nutshell is the **mystery** of the Christian faith: that God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ can himself teach each one of us.



312 - A Prayer for the School

O God of faithfulness, in Christ
you keep your promises to your people:
give us this year the faith to take them seriously.

O God of steadfast love, in Christ you loved us first:
give us in this school the love to respond
with gratitude and grace.

O God of everlasting hope,
in Christ you conquered death:
give us in our teaching and learning the hope
which endures and wins through.

This we ask, in Christ, for our good and your glory.

Amen

