

First Assembly – September 2020

Welcome back

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

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

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

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

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.

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This style of fighting outlived the battle formations of the Spartans. It was the foundation of the

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