

James Cobban Centenary Celebration November 27 2010: Evensong Address.

"...Words of learned length, and thundering sound,
Amazed the gazing rustics all around;
And still they gazed and still the wonder grew,
That *One Small Head* could carry all he knew".

[from "The Deserted Village"- Oliver Goldsmith, quoted in "One Small Head" by James Cobban]

James Macdonald Cobban, K.B., C.B.E., T.D., D.L. One small head? Here was a giant of a man, of towering intellect and monumental vision, of extraordinary commitment, overwhelming energy and massive achievements.
How can we do justice or return adequate thanks to a man of such stature ?

Right now, I feel like the missionary, stumbling through remote bush country, who suddenly came face to face with an enormous lion. Realising that his end had come, the missionary knelt down to say his final prayer. After a few moments nothing had happened. He opened his eyes. There in a circle around him was a whole family of lions, all kneeling down in an attitude of prayer. He looked at the chief lion and the chief lion looked at him and said: " I don't know what you're doing, but we're saying grace".

JMC used to say that a sermon should rarely exceed seven and a half minutes, and even on special occasions no more than eleven. He was usually a spellbinding preacher, but David Riddick recalls that we used to time him. I can see now, that old habits die hard. "Confine yourself to three main points", he once told me, raw young priest that I was. "Well how can I, Sir ? " I now plead, " When your Old Boys have been loading me up with great heaps of good things they want me to say about you, and your own dear daughters could each offer a bookful ?" [*slight pause*]. "Ah. Right, Sir. Yes, Sir. Three points it is".

First then, the Man of Duty. But for JMC, this was no dry obligation. It was a *passionate striving to do what is right*, in every situation and for each individual. His self-discipline was legendary, and he demanded high standards from his staff, his boys and his own children. Our second lesson tonight emphasises the need for discipline, not for its own sake, but for a purpose. It brings a harvest of righteousness and peace. So it was with James Cobban. And what a harvest! Not only did he nurture four daughters of whom he was always immensely proud, but he launched thousands of boys across the threshold of their adult lives, *knowing the difference between right and wrong*, equipped to take hold of their lives, ready to make their contributions in the world.

His self-discipline was a pre-requisite for his prodigious productivity. Like Kipling, JMC required us, if we were to become MEN, to fill our unforgiving minutes with sixty seconds' worth of distance run.

This Man of Duty, however, would pack in *twice* that distance himself, leaving us gasping at the range of his achievements in but a single day, every day. Terence Libby reveals how successive Sixth Form Classicists, have etched on their collective memory , the picture of the Headmaster sprinting across the gravel, clutching his books and mortar-board, gown flying, hurdling the hedge in front of the Science Block.

Friends, colleagues and Old Boys – and anyone who has attempted to match his pace on a walk – were always flabbergasted at the boundless energy, the prolific output and the sheer zest for living.

James Cobban gave a whole new meaning to our understanding of Duty. To all the many causes he espoused, he gave deep commitment, unrelenting determination, and heartfelt enthusiasm, from the Direct Grant, and later, Assisted Places Scheme, where his work earned him well-deserved honour, to the needs of the least able student, in whom he would always seek to tease out the buried treasure.

For he believed in us. All of us. Passionately. He really cared for us. He made time for us. He grieved with us, sweated with us, rejoiced with us.

Tony Howell writes, as many might:-

“He was my mentor. He inspired me. I think he probably found me exasperating, yet (as an Old Boy) I went to see him many times and we became firm friends”.

Bruce Mackay testifies to his “irrepressible desire to extricate the best from everyone in his care”. Many others have said the same. This went way beyond the call of duty.

Why have so many Old Boys spoken with him, written to him, visited him, offered our thanks to him, long after we all left school ?

Because - in the deepest Christian sense of the word - *he loved us*. He loved his family in a way which was always, uniquely, reserved for them. He loved his colleagues who depended on his leadership and support. He loved us, his charges: the difficult boys, with whom he worked tirelessly to try to sort them out; the brilliant boys, who thrilled him with their prowess; the mediocre boys in whom he was always looking to ignite the spark he believed was in each one of us.

His loving kindness could be extended to any who crossed his path. Diana [*nee Cobban*] tells of the ‘gentleman of the road’ who was regularly fed and watered by James and Lorna, before going on his way. When he became ill, James arranged for him to go to hospital. When the old tramp died, James and his loyal sister Katie were the only mourners, but he was given a proper Anglican burial.

Hilary [*nee Cobban*] reveals a remarkable incident. Already in his eighties, James made a difficult journey, by public transport, to visit a wayward Old Boy was residing at a certain institution at Her Majesty’s Pleasure. This was far more than duty – it was Christian love.

That breadth of care and concern also showed itself in JMC ‘the true Educator’. *We were encouraged to think for ourselves*. The Head was not beyond making a deliberately inane remark in a lesson with senior boys – then remonstrating with them if they didn’t challenge him. We could disagree with him on some important issue of life, and he would discuss the matter vigorously but always respect our right to differ. Always he cared. And we felt it, tried to live up to it. In the Book of Proverbs, Wisdom says, as we heard in the First Lesson : “My son, accept my words : I will guide you in the way of wisdom, and lead you along straight paths”. We do well to heed the guiding words of James Cobban.

Yet life with JMC was not one of mirthless intensity. He was blessed with a wonderful sense of humour. The stories are legion. No doubt John Bunce will ensure that tonight's celebration bubbles with laughter as the anecdotes come tumbling out.

We are indebted to Eric Anderson for this tale of his errant hound. It seems that James had been brought out of retirement to preach one Sunday. After chapel, whilst he and the then Head were taking coffee, James deposited his sermon notes and his mortar board on the low windowsill at Lacies Court. On departing they discovered that the dog had chewed the mortar board. "I'm very sorry" said Sir Eric. "Well I am sorry", said Sir James "that he seems to have found my sermon indigestible".

Man of Duty, Man of Humour, the Man who Loved. Finally, and this, I believe, is the key, James Cobban was, through and through, *a Man of faith*.

His was a rock-solid, vibrant, living Christian faith, which saw him through both Triumph and Disaster and enabled him to see both as the imposters they are. Mary [*nee Cobban*] does not want us to dwell on the great sorrows of his life and we shall not. As she says, today is a Celebration. Let his own words speak of himself as:-

"Someone who has experienced the extremes of joy and sorrow but who retains an unshakeable belief in the ultimate power of good". [*"One Small Head"p.75*].

He wanted all of us to be able to feel it, too, this sense of the ultimate, this awareness of the Spiritual. Not as an exam subject, which could be taught. This could only be caught. And caught it was, from James, in myriad ways, by countless boys. Consciously or unconsciously, we became aware that this was the fuel which fired his boundless energy, his ordered discipline, his driving ambition for the school and its pupils, his herculean achievements.

His faith was no one-day-a-week doffing of the cap to some half-forgotten deity. It was *real*. It was *how life made sense to James*, every day of the week. It inspired his vision and stirred his imagination. It is this, he writes, which enabled him to believe in the potential good of young people. It is the well from which his heart was filled with love. Writing near the end of his life, James thanks God for five things – faith, family, friends, fitness and the fulfilment that comes from always having had the good fortune to be doing a worthwhile job. What more, he asks, can a man want ? "

One Small Head - One Great Heart! James, (for I know you are listening!) *we thank you*. We thank you for giving us of your time and your abundant talents. We thank you for setting us on the road of life, knowing right from wrong, and for giving so much of yourself to each one us, for all the time you were with us.

We thank you for your loving care, for the twinkle in your eye.

As you have so richly blessed us, may the God of Love Bless you.

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[Reverend Canon Randell Moll O.A. 27 November 2010]