

**Address at the Service of Celebration for the 40th Anniversary of the Star College
on Friday 16 May 2008 in Gloucester Cathedral
by the Bishop of Gloucester, The Right Revd Michael Perham**

Sometimes you can feel a bit superfluous. In poetry and song students of the Star College have already expressed something of what we want to say and celebrate today and Amy Hawking's poem says "Let's speak up for ourselves, instead of others doing it for us." So I speak somewhat hesitantly on behalf of others.

But first, let me express congratulations to the Star College on this fortieth anniversary year. It is a real pleasure for us, for the cathedral, a real honour for us, that you have chosen to conclude this special year here in Gloucester Cathedral.

I want to give you four words to hold on to that express for me the importance of the Star College and of today.

The first word, almost inevitably, is "thanks" - thankfulness, thanksgiving. Thanks for the founders, for people like Iris Ratsey, Eleanor Beevers, Isobel Cripps and Andrew Wilson 40 years ago. Thanks for the visionaries at every stage who have called first the Centre, and then the College, to more ambitious things. Thanks for the staff of every kind, for the governors, for the benefactors, for the supporters in the community. Thanks for the inventors - the people who have made powered wheelchairs much more sophisticated, for the people who have made assistive communication devices, for the people who have seen how IT advances can revolutionise the life of Star College students. Thanks for the students, who encourage and inspire one another, but also inspire all those who work alongside them to draw out of them their full potential. Thanks for the college as it is today, a community of support, friendship, encouragement and fun.

For all these thank you - and for the Christian that thank you is directed, not only to one another, but to God, whose Holy Spirit animates, motivates, all those who have done and still do these remarkable things.

First, "thanks". My second word is "courage". The students of the Star College need a lot of courage. Such a lot might make them, you, give up, when everything demands much effort, much perseverance, much patience, sometimes, I fear, the enduring of pain and disappointment and even ill-conceived ridicule. To rise above all that takes guts, determination and courage.

I think we sometimes forget the connection between courage and encouragement, encouragement. Courage comes partly from within, partly from those who draw it out of us. The Star College does that, draws courage out of its students. At home, for many, families do that. Everywhere those carrying the same difficulties, facing the same challenges, do that. You encourage one another and find the courage to keep going and sometimes to be heroic, sometimes to do things that make you a star. Star College - a college of stars.

First, "thanks". Second, "courage". My third word is "community". So I am coming at a different angle now. The college is a community, of course, with all the joys and sometimes the frustrations that community living can bring. But I want us to think for a moment about the place of this college in the wider community. The college has many friends. You may be a national college, but you belong to Gloucestershire, and Gloucestershire is proud of you. The links with the wider community enrich you, but they also enrich that wider community. You hold before us values that we need to see modelled, - support for one another, passion that everyone shall reach their full potential, determination and courage, and much more.

There is still a long way to go in placing the Star College where it belongs as one of the jewels in the crown of Gloucestershire. Tonight shows we are part way down that path. I want to encourage everybody to go on working at it. "Everybody should speak up," as Amy's poem says. Here is an institution in which the community should take delight.

"Thanks. Courage. Community." The final word is "blessing". The Principal read the passage from Matthew's Gospel that we call the Beatitudes, the series of blessings. Jesus talks about various groups of people, whom the world thinks have had a rough deal - those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst, those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, those who are reviled. He also speaks of some others, who may not have had a rough deal, but who may sound as if they are among the losers - the meek, the merciful, the peace-makers, the pure in heart. And he doesn't say "feel sorry for them". He doesn't say "pity them". He doesn't even say "rescue them". He says there are some really good things that await them - theirs is the kingdom of heaven, they will inherit the earth, they will receive mercy, they will be called the children of God. That's all good and encouraging, but all rather focused on future reward or future reversal of fortunes.

But he also calls them "happy". That's almost the right word. More often we say "blessed", which is a bit more subtle. It's a sort of divine happiness, a blessing that comes from God. And it doesn't say they will one day in the future be happy, blessed, but that they are happy, blessed, right now. "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers." Some of the people whom the world judges unfortunate have got something really special. They are the blessed ones, for they shine with a light that others do not have. And the blessing comes from God. The Star College has got a lot of those special people. If we have any sense, we will recognise them as a blessing, to one another and to the wider community, and envy what they have, as well as honouring them for coping courageously with what they have not.

The Star College is to them a blessing. They are to the College, to all of us and to our county, a blessing that ought never to be in disguise.

"Thanks, Courage, Community, Blessing." Four words for a celebration day!

+Michael Gloucestr: