You all look beautiful today – which is good – in this short lived season of sharpened pencils, and new files and good intentions for hard work and discipline – less partying and more graft – that first among the senior management of course.

We Americans are not necessarily known for our humility, and we have rather a lot to be humble about -

So I will demonstrate my cross-cultural awareness by starting with that most English of practices – an apology.

(If you are new to English shores – this is important for your orientation - the English have evolved the apology to an art form – and it is also true that almost uniquely among different cultures, a certain kind of English woman or man gets more polite as they get more angry – think about it – it’s true.)

Here’s my apology – I’m going to refer to a quote not from Thomas Guy, nor Desmond Tutu nor another of King’s great ones, but from an 18th century educator across the pond. For which I apologise.

Here’s the quote – in 1778 John Philips said...

‘...though goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous...’

He was talking about the purpose of education: goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, but knowledge without goodness is dangerous....

This quote has been much in my mind as I have listened, along with all of you, to the public conversation of our politicians, commentators, our legal minds and economists this week – which friends has not been getting more polite as it gets more angry.

Goodness, and knowledge, these mutually interdependent goals of education have never been more important than they are today, nor more under threat.

And forgive me, philosophers among you, I am going to talk about goodness and knowledge as if we know what they are.

Or at least that ‘we know them when we see them.’ Incidentally this was the test used in 1964 by United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart to describe something called ‘hard-core pornography’ in a case relating to freedom of speech. ‘I know it when I see it.’

‘...though goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous....

Goodness, it seems to me, is too often displaced in present fashions, substituted with a kind of appropriate quiet conformity.

I am speaking here both of goodness in our public culture, and at times, as an implicit goal in our educational thinking.

Goodness, as a category is about more than quiet appropriate conformity: our students and our staff - good women and men should be rule breakers of the best kind, risk takers – Goodness, which in Christian tradition is always about more than self – is never more important than when the public fashion counsels self protection and calls it good, when the public voice counsels to keep our ambition limited to what people will vote for, and call it goodness.

And you are about something much meatier in the goodness you do, in the life of King’s College.
You are, and have always been for the ones our public life treats as problems, not people – the ill, the lame, the poor.

Right now through the work of King’s College you are doing research to help working families who are homeless, and in temporary accommodation. And young people making the transition from education to work, and to resist gang culture and knife crime. And so much more.

Right now at King’s you are opening education to people who never could have access to it before. This is countercultural – it is true to your history, and it is good.

But what is it we have said - Goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous.

Knowledge, perhaps even more than goodness is as a category vastly under threat today – is displaced in our public values by something called information - and the power to get that information, to spread and to control it.

I am as much guilty on this score as anyone – I don’t need to know the way to the place I’m going, I tell my very tolerant husband, because I’ve got this lovely phone with its handy apps to guide me along the lanes of even the furthest flung city or town – until the battery dies, or the UK loses access to the GPS system, or I realise I’m walking back to the station while my phone thinks I am in Sierra Leone, or whatever.

If goodness is displaced too easily by conformity, I fear Knowledge is displaced in public fashion by information – and information which is only as durable as our attention and our access, yours and mine, in the moment – and our attention to the information which flows past us, friends, is bought and sold as a commodity.

Our attention is farmed for profit, and power. Our outrage, or our approval are seeded, cultivated, and make no mistake – harvested - for profit and power.

The beautiful thing about knowledge, which allied to goodness may makes something that starts to look like wisdom – is that it outlasts our first attention – the meaning of knowledge changes as we age – it furnishes the inside of our minds and hearts with enough understanding of the world around us that we can achieve humility, and independent, self-critical judgment - science, and art, and literature – history languages, poetry – and yes, scripture and the tools of faith.

These things help us to resist not just the rule of the mob and the market, but also the evil inclinations of our own hearts – knowledge allied to goodness prepares us to say those revolutionary radical words – ‘I was wrong.’ And to change our minds.

Wisdom she stands at the crossroads and calls out. Borrow her voice as you start this year, friends. Borrow her voice, let her cadences draw your breath and strengthen your speech.

Goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous.

Friends, we live in a dangerous world – when the best lack all conviction, the worst do seem to burn with passionate intensity.

The purpose of education, that thing in which you are all involved, is to form kind, risk taking, thoughtful, strong, pragmatic idealists – Because we live in a dangerous world. And that dangerous world demands more from us, and more from our young people than mere success.

Thank you for what you are doing, here at King’s whatever your part in it. Encourage one another, keep your pencils sharpened, and amidst the hard work and discipline let there too be celebrations and joy.

And if you are passing Wesley’s Chapel on City Road, by all means look in, you are welcome.

The Revd Canon Dr Jennifer Smith, Superintendent Minister, Wesley's Chapel