Speeches

What would you consider to be history’s top five speeches of all time? Last week, on the anniversary of the Gettysburg Address (1863, ‘four score and seven…’ Abraham Lincoln to the American troops during the American Civil War), I was teaching a year six class and I ran through a few of them. It was more interesting than explaining the grid method for multiplication.

So, here we go: for us Brits Winston Churchill has to be up there, although which speech to choose from I don’t know. Perhaps the Battle of Britain ‘Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few…’? For the US, as well as the Gettysburg Address, we have Martin Luther King: ‘I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character.’

Something with a Plymouth connection – Queen Elizabeth gathered the troops at Tilbury and sent them off with a rousing speech to beat the Armada. I’m not sure how much of an impact it had on the outcome, but the way she dressed, the way she was presented, and her stirring words (“I have the body of a weak, feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too.”) it was a powerful moment in her reign.

I said five didn’t I? That means I have one left, and I can’t leave out Nelson Mandela’s Inaugural Speech in 1994. This is because of the content, and the power the words have, bearing in mind the history of South Africa and what he went through to be standing there saying those things.

I make no apologies for the length of the following quote:

"...Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.   
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.  
It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.  
We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?   
Actually, who are you not to be?   
You are a child of God.  
Your playing small does not serve the world.  
There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.   
We are all meant to shine, as children do.  
We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.   
It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.  
And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.  
As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

That’s powerful stuff – I’ve quoted it many times from the pulpit. As you step out of the door in the morning to face the world do so knowing that you were made in God’s image and you have something creative, special and valuable to offer this world.

I wonder how it would go down in the dressing room before a game? Managers have tried different ways of motivating their players before a game – music, a rousing speech, inspirational people popping in to share, a silent pat on the shoulder, hairdryers, pizzas – and most of them beat my other choice which didn’t quite make the top 5. That’s Kevin Keegan whilst manager at Newcastle before playing Fergie’s Man Utd, and voted the most memorable quote from the Premier League’s first 20 years.

‘And I'll tell you, honestly, I will love it if we beat them. Love it.’