

Assembly 4 February 2008

The Weather Crisis

You might have noticed that I have been absent from assembly over the past two weeks. The Rev. Mok tells me that some of you have enquired about my health and wondered if I was feeling unwell. I thank you for your concern and for the best wishes I have received from some students. The reason for my absence has indeed been due to ill health but I am pleased to inform you that I am now much better.

As we are all aware, it has been cold, wet and unpleasant in Hong Kong over the past ten days. Indeed, I am sure that a number of boys will be absent today with a cold or runny nose, typical signs of the winter season. The bad weather is set to continue this week and it is your responsibility to look after yourselves and minimize the chances of catching a cold or the 'flu. I encourage each of you to dress according to these conditions; by wearing your blazer as you walk around the school; by wearing a face mask if you believe that you have a virus; by checking your temperature before leaving home in the morning; by eating well and getting a good night's sleep.

Of course, these unusual conditions in Hong Kong pale into insignificance when compared to what is taking place on the Mainland. We cannot begin to imagine what it must be like in the many snow-bound provinces of central and southern China. The newspaper photographs of snow-covered houses, trees and roads show a bleak winter landscape but do not really give a true picture of what conditions are like for the rural and urban communities. Some of the photographs appear pretty, even romantic. The more confronting photographs, however, are those pictures and news clips of the crowds waiting for trains and buses at transport termini across the country.

It is in those teeming crowds that we find the real victims of the weather crisis. It is now seven days since the first people set out on their journeys to catch their trains and buses home. A week later, many are still stranded at the train stations, joined by tens of thousands of fellow would-be travelers, all desperate to be home for the Lunar New Year. Many are migrant workers, spending what little money they had on a ticket for the journey north. Many started their journeys hoping to be with family and friends in only two or three days. Instead, they find themselves with thousands of strangers, trapped in a crowd that has no place to go. They are cold, hungry, tired and frightened. We cannot imagine what it must be like in such conditions; we can only visualise the scene by looking at photographs.

What is remarkable is that there have been few incidents of panic or unrest or death. The people are angry, confused and desperate, yet they have not resorted to violence. In spite of their hardships, they understand that the weather conditions are so unusual and that a great deal is being done by the authorities to come to their aid. By now, many would have resigned themselves to the fact that they will not be going home for the New Year. To migrant workers, this means another year will pass before they see their families again. One cannot help but feel sad for the predicament they are in.

This brings me back to Hong Kong and our cold snap. In the past week our streets have been awash with coats, hats, scarves and boots. Winter wardrobes are getting an extra two weeks of wear and shops are bringing in unexpected supplies of warmer clothing. It has been uncomfortable but not intolerable. Our public transport systems are still running; our power stations still generating electricity; and the weather will not spoil plans for the New Year. It is important, however, that we remember what is happening to our fellow-citizens on the Mainland and the difficulties that they are experiencing.

I wish you all a happy New Year and a successful second class work of effort and achievement.