

Dear Parents

I spent the first three days of the holidays out at Volmoed – a beautiful Christian retreat a few kilometres outside Hermanus. It was the perfect place to go to shed the stresses and strains of the term. We read books, took long walks and played cards. On the second morning I got up before anyone else and walked up a hill on the top of which someone had raised a large rough cross. It took about an hour to get there and I felt so privileged to have the place to myself. It was Passion Sunday so I spent some time thinking about the cross and what it meant to me – both its hope and its challenge. The view was spectacular and I marvelled both at God's creation and the skill and vision of the farmers and others who had developed the valley so tastefully and effectively. After a while my more spiritual side started to be pushed aside by thoughts of the cooked brunch we had decided to have before returning to Cape Town and so with mixed feelings I descended the hill to take up once more the responsibilities of being an adult. However, that 3 hours of the holiday remain the highlight for me despite many other happy times with family and good services over Easter.

Our last Chaplain, Fr Coomer, liked to take the Confirmation Candidates out to High Noon for a few days a couple of weeks before their confirmation. One of the things he would get them to do was go up onto the side of the mountain, find a spot away from any of their peers and sit for a couple of hours alone. No ipods or phones were allowed. He gave them some reading matter to get them thinking but they did not have to use it. They just had to sit there and look and listen (and think if they wanted to do so). It was a simple thing and yet many reported afterwards that it was the most significant time for them – more so than the talks, bible studies and times of worship.

Each year I hike with a group of grade 10 boys in the Cedarberg. I am not a great lover of hiking but I always find it interesting observing the boys and how they cope with the various challenges. One of the things I have noticed is that they are rarely quiet whilst awake. In fact one has to get them quite tired before they lapse into silence and sadly now days I am usually tired long before most of them! However, every now and then as the sun sets or they sit near the edge of a mountain peak they stop talking and just look and listen. It does not last long before someone feels the need to break the silence but it is always a special moment and I think a lot of good things happen inside them then.

In an effort to encourage this silence we now have the on the epic - one day alone next to a stream. I think it would be better on the side of a mountain but it would not be as safe nor as comfortable. 24 hours may not seem a long time to adults but it is to a teenager who is used to the continual stimulation of friends, music and movies. Again many find it helpful – both in rising to the challenge and the effect of being alone with one's thoughts.

I wonder if we should be providing our children with more opportunities to be alone with their thoughts. It is not easy to drag an unwilling teenager onto a mountain or into a forest but perhaps it is worth the effort just to get them enjoy silence and space for a while.

Perhaps you are the one who needs to find this space alone or with a partner who does not need to natter too much. It is important for our children that we keep things together emotionally and few things are as beneficial as a quiet place with a good view and time to just be.

I thought we got off to a good start this week with a lovely service including an excellent sermon from Mr Nupen encouraging boys to stand on their own two feet and kneel on their own two knees; self-reliance but also reliance on others and on God. I hope this term is a good one for your son(s).

Yours sincerely  
Peter Westwood