

Kings College London Chapel: Opening of Year Service

Wednesday 27th September 2017

It is a very great pleasure to be with you at the start of a new term, and of a new academic year; at the start, for many of you, of a new course of study. I am grateful to the Dean, Professor Richard Burridge, for his invitation, and grateful to the Principal, the Chair of Council, and all of you, for your welcome. And I particularly relish the opportunity to be here in your Chapel at the very heart of King's College London.

KCL is an institution with which I have had a long friendship. In particular the Faculty of Life Sciences & Medicine has its four London campuses all south of the river, in my own Diocese. The Guy's campus literally (at certain times of the day) casts a shadow on Southwark Cathedral, and its Chaplain, Jim Craig, holds my licence, as does Jane Speck, Chaplain to the Waterloo and Denmark Hill Campuses. They are two among many Chaplains, several of them Anglican, but also of other Christian denominations, and of course also including within the team Muslim and other faith Chaplains, which is very welcome.

And this is all a great source of strength. Naturally, as any sensible person must, I have a high regard for London's other great historic College. But UCL, though it does, some people are surprised to learn, possess a Chapel, does not possess a Chapel such as this one. And of course, when I say "Chapel", I do not

refer just to this building, lovely though it be, but to the community of which it is the physical centre, but which ripples out through the life of the College.

The presiding genius at UCL is, of course, Jeremy Bentham, whose effigy is present at important occasions in the life of the College, and whose mummified head is a treasured possession. And it was Jeremy Bentham that Charles Dickens had in mind (not, one must admit, quite fairly) when he created the character of Mr Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, that infamous caricature of Utilitarian education.

“Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach [them] nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else.”

Mr Gradgrind asks a girl in the class to give her “definition of a horse”, which she is unable to do.

“Girl number twenty possessed of no facts, in reference to one of the commonest of animals!”

He turns to another child, who pipes up,

“Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron.”

“Now girl number twenty,” said Mr. Gradgrind. “You know what a horse is.”

This is parody, but it has its feet in the truth. The utilitarian acquisition of facts is not education.

It was by contrast the fully conscious intention of the founders of this College to live and understand the nature of this place of learning by what is encapsulated in the wonderful motto, "*Sancte et Sapienter*": "with holiness and with wisdom". And that motto seems to be embodied in this place.

Indeed, leaving on one side the question of what kind of learning is worthy of pursuing, this is a special and beautiful and resonant place. Certainly more aesthetically pleasing than the mummified and now rather dessicated head of Jeremy Bentham! What more fitting for the centrepiece of a University, than the timeless representations of the great doctors of the Church going back over millennia?

All these considerations were prompted by the opening lines of our reading from the Book of Job: "But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?" [28:12]

For it is surely wisdom and understanding that it is the business of a University to teach. We do not disparage vocational education – the Faculty of Life Sciences & Medicine does a remarkable job of equipping students with hard-edged, utilitarian skills, and I must say as I grow older and have from time to time recourse to the medical profession, I am very glad of it! However, what has to underlie any set of skills, any body of knowledge, any set of facts, what has to hold together all the specific nuggets of learning we acquire, without which they will be nothing worth, is wisdom.

Aristotle gives wisdom just such a special place in his system of ethics. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Wisdom is even more central, perhaps the most highly prized virtue in the Old Testament, personified in Proverbs with a role in

creation. St Paul, in our reading from 1 Corinthians, challenges commonplace notions of wisdom, advocating the true Wisdom of God. Wisdom is the master virtue. We may learn specific skills; we may learn *how* to do certain things. But if we have not wisdom we will not know *whether*, or *when*; we will not know *why*, and then all else that we have learnt will profit us nothing.

And in this day and age we certainly do need Wisdom. We are confronted by a certain darkness in our public life that has to be reckoned with, and which calls for more than procedural solutions: it calls for deep judgement and imaginative sympathy; Wisdom in short.

On March 22nd I was on my way to meet Tobias Ellwood, MP, the Foreign Office Minister, when Khalid Masood struck in Westminster, killing five people, including the brave PC Keith Palmer, whom Tobias Ellwood tried in vain to revive. The following month I had the sombre duty of giving the commendation at Keith Palmer's funeral, as his widow and young daughter stood before his coffin in Southwark Cathedral. Less than two months later, the Cathedral itself was at the centre of an equally barbarous attack in which three men armed with knives killed eight innocent people in Borough Market and for a week the Cathedral was cordoned off within the huge crime scene. And a fortnight after that, disaster of a different but no less terrifying, and even more destructive, struck down eighty residents of Grenfell Tower.

These are realities we have to reckon with, and transforming them is no simple matter. It calls, as I say, for Wisdom, which cannot be counted, cannot be summarised in a set of rules, or taken in pill form! Wisdom is only to be acquired through experience, through contact with the wise, through reflection – indeed, I would say wisdom cannot be got without prayer.

Thus a University, if it is to be truly a University, must have a place at its heart for mystery. It is the business of a University, among other things, to see that those who pass through it shall be wiser when they leave. Universities are one of the ways that a well-functioning society replenishes its vital reservoirs of Wisdom. And Wisdom is mysterious. “Where then does wisdom come from? ..God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.” [Job 28:20, 23]. This is, as St Paul says, “God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.” [1 Co 2:7]

This insight I think lies behind that wonderful motto “with holiness and with wisdom”. For these two are closely related, and Wisdom is predicated on an acceptance that we do not and cannot know everything, that we are not the masters or the creators. The fear of the Lord, as the Bible reminds often [*e.g.* Prov 9:10, Ps 111:10] is the beginning of wisdom. To grow wise is not to seek mastery over a body of knowledge, but to acknowledge that we are not the masters; to see ourselves as finite, microscopic even; to seek the great purposes of God that transcend our own tiny concerns, and to conform our lives to them.

To seek Wisdom is to renounce mastery in favour of mystery.

God, as Job says, looks to the ends of the earth, sees everything under the heavens, gives to the wind its weight, apportions out the waters. [cf Job 28:24-25] by measure; when he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the thunderbolt. God: not us. The skill and knowledge we accumulate is well worth the getting: with it we serve others and earn a decent living. But it will only come to life if we seek Wisdom too. And Wisdom comes through mystery. It comes through letting go. Through humility. Through a sense of

awe. Through patience, trial and error (which also helps with the humility!). It comes, as I have said, through prayer. It is, as St Paul hints, a matter not of learning but of maturing, of being able to view one's own situation through the eyes of eternity, of transcending fashion, peer pressure, and anxiety.

“Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age”.

If we surrender mastery and look rather to mystery, we may hope, slowly, for a portion of God's Wisdom to seep into our bones. And if we get Wisdom, then the ruling spirits of the age – success, power, popularity; money, houses, promotion – all that we feel pressure to strive after, will have less of a hold on us. If we get Wisdom, we will have something to put up against the darkness and evil of which I have spoken, and which we have all seen let loose in and above our streets.

As you go out from this Chapel to study, teach and research, my prayer for you is that you will also seek and find Wisdom, which holds all these together in unity and purpose. May King's, built around this lovely Chapel and its community, always be truly a University, striving indeed with vigour after mastery; yet holding to the truth that at the centre there must be a deeper mystery.