

Critical and Reflective Practice in Education Volume 1 Issue 1 2009

A Sermon preached by the Rt Revd Michael Langrish, Bishop Of Exeter at a Eucharist to mark the Golden Jubilee of the Mary Harris Memorial Chapel in the University of Exeter, on Sunday 22nd June 2008

Readings: Proverbs 1/2-7; 1 Corinthians 2/6-13; John 14/1-14

Today we celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the Consecration of this University Chapel, and we do this in a week when Exeter University has once again improved its position as a top twenty University, coming 13th in the Times League Table. But what do these things mean? What does it mean that this building is 'dedicated'? What does it mean to be a university, let alone a 'top one'? The question of meaning is actually a good starting point. The word University etymologically points to an institution which is *universus*, all together, turned in one direction, focused on a common point, having a holistic concern for what is universal. And a similar sense infuses another term with which we are familiar – College, as in the College of St Luke, or the Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry. This word comes from *collego*, meaning to read together within a common bond. And 50 years ago the most common understandings of what a university was for tended to reflect this same focus on what was common or what was shared. And so just 5 years after this chapel was dedicated, the Robbins Commissionⁱ which led to the establishment of a wave of new universities spoke of them as having four key purposes: the development of educational skills; the promotion of general powers of the mind; the advancement of learning and the search for truth; and the transmission of culture and common standards of citizenship.

Looking back on that vision I am reminded of G K Chesterton: '*education is the soul of society passed from one generation to another*'.ⁱⁱ Then there is still the echo of the origins of universities and colleges

in religious communities with their common life in the service of truth. How things have changed since then, with government requirements for universities today, especially 'top ones', being, for example: developing students' potential for work and contribution to the nation's wealth; increasing knowledge not just for its own sake, but for the good of the economy, to serve the needs of business and commerce; and to shape a pluralist and multicultural society. The language now is more frequently that of the market with students as customers and consumers, no longer supported in a common task by the public purse, but purchasing that which will bring individual reward, even if at the cost of short term debt. In this language framework it is not always clear as to who really is the customer, and what is the product, and who has a right to decide? It also begs the question of what then a University still has to offer to a student who knows that they are dying of cancer or AIDS.

Concepts such as universality and collegiality can seem increasingly counter-cultural and out of date. And yet the ghosts of these earlier models of Higher Education stubbornly remain. Still a high academic aim is for a **fellowship** – again the implication is of attaining a role or place in a community of learning or the shared endeavour of the pursuit of truth. And then again the standard post-graduate research qualification remains the Ph. D – a doctorate of **philosophy**, literally the love of wisdom. Once more here is a word that sounds increasingly old fashioned. We all know many smart people; we are happy to talk of well-educated people (and probably hope to be among them). But stop for a moment and think: how many people do you know whom you would describe as wise?

And yet in the Christian tradition wisdom is among the characteristics to which humans are to aspire

most of all, and to be wise is a sign of the most truly, or wholly, developed and mature woman or man. And wisdom, says the Bible, has its roots in an abandonment of autonomy, and self-sufficiency and individualism (so many of the things that mark out our culture and society today) and in an acknowledgement of our limitations, and the partiality of our individual perceptions and perspectives, and in the recognition of the need to submit our own judgments and knowledge to something bigger than ourselves – to be found in a relationship of truth and grace with other people (that is in a ‘fellowship’ again) and ultimately in humbly waiting upon God. *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; but fools despise wisdom and instruction.*’ (Prov 1/7) Wisdom is, then, unashamedly about living in such a way that God, and God’s intentions for the world, are acknowledged in all we are and all that we do. And wisdom, therefore, cannot be commodified; it doesn’t fit the language of the market, it can’t be bought, or unearthed by individual effort or skill. Because it is concerned with truth it has to be discovered – or we have to allow it to discover us, together, in a facing, often painfully facing, of the whole reality of the human experience, the comfortable **and** the uncomfortable, the orderly **and** the disorderly, held together – often as much in tension as in harmony and accord.

To quote Rowan Williams: *“when you set side by side the structure of the DNA molecule and the death of a child from famine, you will at least understand that **explanation** is not the (full) way to respond . . . When a death has been explained – by biology . . . by economics . . . by history – it remains, or should remain unassimilable, a bruise, a challenge”* to us all.ⁱⁱⁱ So, if the development of our intellect does not sharpen, rather than deaden, our moral discomfort with the world, and if it does not therefore also develop in us a capacity to seek that which give us hope, then what is it really worth?

And if increasing knowledge does not enable us to more fully recognise where the cracks of untruthfulness run across our own moral vision, then what wisdom is there in that?

Here is one reason why any truly intellectual community, any academy of learning cannot be monochrome, or seek to exclude or marginalise some ways of knowing rather than others from an engagement in this common task. The pursuit of truth and wisdom require empirical knowledge and analytic research, an understanding of that which is capable of comprehension and control; and at the same time needs those disciplines that throw into sharp relief what is uncontrollable and disordered in human experience, together with the axioms and the linguistic and aesthetic tools that enable us to engage with all of these things.

One of the things that strikes me about all the so-called Wisdom books of the Old Testament is that each of them is written in poetry. That is – they seek to open the world to us through the artful use of words. They invite us to be patient and curious about the word choices they make, and so about the actuality that they seek to describe. They speak to us at multiple levels, rather than simply through rational explanations. And – for all these reasons – they demand they we read them slowly. They invite us to deep imaginative reflection on the realities with which they deal, which are both the most ordinary and the most far reaching experiences of human life: birth and death; poverty and wealth, education and work, grief and joy; human love and love of God. These books of wisdom summon us to engage with them a little bit at a time, letting our minds flow freely over, and around, the associations they suggest.

But this is an exercise that requires time, another thing often lacking in the modern university with the demands upon it for packaged information,

speed reading, research outputs and publications to order. And yet these market demands are made of those elements of the university which we still choose to call **schools**, a word which comes this time from the Greek σχολαι, meaning places of leisure, where a *scholar* has time. I am reminded of the very young girl who responded to a student teacher's impossible question: "*What do you need to have civilisation?*" with the magnificently insightful answer: "*Is it spare time, sir?*"

Well, time, yes; but also humility and provisionality in our own intellectual development as we allow ourselves to be open to that which remains beyond ourselves. As I was taught when undertaking my own teacher training: '*The true teacher must create in us the very capacity to learn; and so be a teacher of what we do not know and have never known, but will want to know now.*'

One of the most deeply disturbing aspects of contemporary culture is its tendency to draw an arbitrary and artificial line between the knowledge given us by empirical disciplines such as science, as something that we **all** know, and the fruits of theology, or the arts or literary studies as what just **some of us** happen to believe. This distinction is both futile and false, as any serious physicist or philosopher will testify. Both biology and theology seek to add to a true account of what is the case; and both also involve faith commitments, which are then open to dialogue and further refinement in the pursuit of further truth. And this false distinction is deeply dangerous too. If analysis and a Mr Gradgrind demand for 'facts' is all there is, then matters of ethics and culture and hope become merely a matter of personal preference and choice. And then, as the philosopher Nietzsche^{iv} saw with great clarity, in the public realm all that is left is the will and that means, no matter how carefully gift wrapped and attractively packages, the will to power.

Why is it that it is so difficult to speak of right and wrong today, but instead we increasingly use the language of values, lifestyles and orientations? Why do we not ask of a world view: 'Is it true?' but rather 'Does it work for me?' or 'Are you sincere?' Where in a modern university is the concern to find a common point, in a shared reading of the world that we inhabit as a single whole? When we bypass the more affective disciplines, when we dismiss the irrefutable religious dimension to human existence as second rate to rational analysis and technological explanation and solution to all human life, then not only are we in grave danger of anaesthetising the pain of truthful moral perception, but also then justifying the unjustifiable and allowing the intolerable to be tolerated, or at least to suffer from its imposition by another's will. And the empirical evidence for the reality of this in recent human history is not hard to find.

"*I am the Truth,*" said Jesus "*and the Way and the life.*"^v Note, not '*I have the truth*' but '*I am*'. Truth, like wisdom, is not a commodity. It is found in that openness to, and submission to, the whole reality that is human life - in relation to other created persons and things, and the Creator, and redeemer, and giver of hope too.

That is why this chapel is here, and it is for **this** that it was dedicated in 1958. This building stands here as a sign and an invitation; and everything that goes on here, day by day - the faithful recitation of common prayer, the solemn commemoration of the work of our redemption, all the words and all the music of the liturgy, the work of the whole ecumenical chaplaincy team in inviting of people of faith and none to ponder the riddles and complexities of human existence – all of these are to be a reminder, a call to recognition of a sacred reality, a remembrance of the holiness (the wholeness), the wisdom, the truth of God, to which

we are pointed and called in Christ. In a very secular culture with its very secularized institutions, one of the vocations of the church must be a continual reminder that the integrity of our intellectual life ultimately depends upon our dedication to absolute truth which we seek to know - and love; and a concern for wisdom, which is as much about living as it is about knowing. In today's world especially the questions of T S Eliot in Choruses from "The Rock" have lost none of their relevance or power:

*Where is the life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in
knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in
information?*^{vi}

All the knowledge, know-how, skill and information in this university do not of themselves add up to wisdom, and teaching and research that is not somehow concerned with the deepening of moral vision and enlarging a capacity for hope is failing in its responsibility to contribute to a school of truth. Without that dedication, without that unity of focus, there can be no genuine university, but only a multiversity of information and techniques with no coherence, or co-reading, of final significance for us all.

Thus this chapel is by no means a marginal add on to the facilities of the university, not just a convenience for those who want to go to church, not just for the life style preference of a few, but a gift at the very heart of the whole enterprise; and what goes on here, whether it be some great ceremony, or just a handful of people faithfully maintaining the daily heartbeat of prayer, is of primary importance to the true meaning of 'the university'. The truth is sacred, wisdom is precious and both are to be sought with humility - and God's grace.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Robbins Commission : Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister, 'Report on Higher Education' (Robbins Report), 1963, HMSO.
- ⁱⁱ G.K.Chesterton *Illustrated London News* 7th May 1924. Chesterton wrote a daily column.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Rowan Williams, a sermon preached at the Commemoration of Founders and Benefactors, Clare College, Cambridge and printed in '*Open to Judgement – Sermons and Addresses,*' DLT 1994.
- ^{iv} Nietzsche, F., 'The Will To Power' (trans. W' Kaufmann & R J Hollingdale; New York: Vintage, 1968)
- ^v John 14/6
- ^{vi} T S Eliot, (opening stanza from Choruses : 'The Rock' 1934), 'Collected Poems 1909-1935' (London: Faber & Faber, 1936)