A Sermon

Preached

in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

The Rt Hon. Lord Waldegrave of North Hill

on

Sunday, 3 November 2013

William James used to preach 'the will to believe'. For my part, I should wish to preach 'the will to doubt,' said Bertrand Russell, himself not the least dogmatic of men. I want to try to explain why this Chapel and other places like it can remain central to someone like me to whom doubt comes much more easily than belief, even though it might be considered by most people a place of faith and dogma, enemies of doubt. In the process, I will attempt, I am afraid inadequately, to pay the tribute to this College which anyone who has benefitted so much from it as I have owes. I will even try to offer as an addendum to that tribute some unsolicited and most probably impertinent advice about how we should behave if we really mean it when we say we honour and wish to preserve what I take to be the most important thing of all which our predecessors left to us: our collegiality.

I am one of those, perhaps like Colin Kidd who preached here movingly a few years back, who finds difficulty with literal belief in the doctrines of this or any other Church, what a former Chaplain of Queen's and Bishop of Durham called 'conjuring tricks with bones' and the rest. Like Hornblower and our own Jenkyns, I was taught at school by a former pupil of Richard Robinson's at Oriel. Our teacher, John Roberts, gave me his old tutor's book, *An Atheist's Values,* to read. I found it difficult completely to disagree with Robinson's rhetoric. 'This is prudence not morality' he says of the Sermon on the Mount, with all its rewards for good behaviour, and implicit threats to sinners.

So why on earth when I read Richard Dawkins or the late Christopher Hitchens, friendly acquaintances both, do I instinctively shy away and refuse to join their team? Partly it is because of the room for doubt which the founder of

Christianity seems to me to leave to us. Of course there is plenty of moralising of the sort Robinson objects to, most of it fairly standard for the time and place, or at least not very original, though some of it much finer than Robinson allows. But there is no inescapable Book; there is no great sword-bearing institution established for conquest of the unfaithful; there seem simply to be a series of paradoxical and troublesome suggestions that we are intended to think out for ourselves. Whenever I think I understand what Jesus meant, I have another go at the parable of the Unjust Steward and am baffled yet again. But He does make you think.

This deliberate complexity, which must have confused and often disappointed His earliest admirers, seems to me to be a powerful antibody to the deadly certainties which I fear most. It is easier to imagine Jesus in friendly conversation with Socrates than either of them with any of the great systematisers, including those who took Christianity to the place where Disraeli could correctly observe to a progressive churchman of his day, 'Pray remember, Mr Dean, no dogma, no Dean', let alone to the place inhabited by modern extreme evangelicism, its Muslim equivalents, or the murderous Hindu extremists drilling in their Baden-Powell shorts and saffron head bands. It is, perhaps, more easily possible to imagine Jesus respecting the ethos of free argument which a College like this now represents than it is to imagine Him dressed in glorious vestments in a great cathedral.

Another reason to hesitate is the poetry, and the music, and the sense of continuity, in the best of those places where prayer has been valid. I am aware that beauty is not a get-out-of-jail-free card: Bach's music did not eradicate

his Lutheran anti-semitism; Henry V celebrated a beautiful Mass before the slaughter of Agincourt, and the wonderful delicate Gothic tracery at Krak des Chevaliers, if it has not been destroyed, is the equivalent of the elegant oak panelling in the wardroom on a Dreadnought; both the ship and the castle were the most powerful weapons of war then known to humankind.

But, but ... I do not think we can quite separate the motivation of those who created such beauty from what it was they made. If the glory of God meant something to them, are we quite sure it should mean nothing to us?

And then there is the centrality and originality of the Christian concept of love, which surely was Jesus's true gift to the world. If good-natured reciprocal Christian love can give us the poetry and the life of George Herbert, not to speak of the quiet moral poise of that poet's latest and best biographer, should we not go a little easy, trampling about in our positivist boots?

So I am afraid that to the irritation of his aristocratic Whig shade, I will continue to have one foot in Russell's camp and one in T.S. Eliot's; to hope to read to future grandchildren both Philip Pullman and C.S. Lewis; admit guiltily to a soft spot for the mystical poems of Charles Williams; and refuse not to be moved by Evensong in the Book of Common Prayer.

I do not for one moment say that such lack of intellectual rigour is essential for the liberal, contingent, pluralist turn of mind I most respect and which I believe lies at the heart of this College. Far from it. I am sure there are plenty of people who define the shadow of religious belief which people like me retain as no more than the left-overs of outdated patterns of thought cluttering up the attics of our

minds, forgivable, perhaps, because after all even Newton's mental attic was cluttered with alchemy. Perhaps it is all just superstition. But I have noticed that even the toughest and most professional tennis players will only serve with the third ball handed to them, and the most reliable Test batsmen will face the next delivery only after going through a ritual of fidgets. So some of us continue to lurk in the giant shadow of the author of *Principia*, or come to that of Rafa Nadal and Jonathan Trott, and sometimes allow ourselves to depart from the purest logic.

But I know there are plenty of colleagues who contribute powerfully to the maintenance of the central purpose of this College, or what I think to be its central purpose, without such nonsense, and even without ever attending Chapel. This building and its traditions helps me, and others. But affection for it is not now essential to commitment to that central purpose. So what is that purpose, and why do I think it precious?

When Hornblower and I were first elected in 1971 one could, alarmingly, not easily have breakfast except in the presence of A.L. Rowse. Over bacon and eggs one heard, perhaps not for the first time, all about the iniquities of the Foreign Office in 1938. On the other hand, for long periods of my Fellowship, if one was quick, one could manoeuvre oneself into range of Isaiah Berlin's glorious muttered running commentaries at College Meetings. Rowse and Berlin detested one another. Over them both presided John Sparrow, the most truly reactionary man I have ever known, with the possible exceptions of his colleagues E.B. Ford and Bryan Wilson. What a ridiculous and dysfunctional place; how easy for Hugh Trevor-Roper to mock. And yet it was also the College of Hampshire,

and Williams, and Parfit and Hussey and Tyson and Alasdair Clayre and Wilberforce and Cross and Dummett and Hurley and Kolakowski and so many more, dead and alive, and of Berlin himself.

How could this disparate group hold together, and produce such an astonishing range of original work? The answer of course is because of the concept of collegiality, often strained, but never quite broken, handed down from the predecessors we honour today. Of course All Souls was then and is now only one of many places where the collective will exists to protect scholarship, to be a haven for doubt and inquiry, and to moderate passionate disagreement by means of commitment to the rules of, on the whole, courtly argument. But perhaps there are not quite so many such places as once there were.

They have many enemies. Enemies include good people as well as bad. They may include those who want every institution mobilised as subsidiary platoons in whatever is the current war for some great good: the abolition of poverty; the suppression of heresy, religious or secular; the campaign against fascism or communism or sexism or racism. But our job is not to be a fighting platoon in an army. Our job is both less and more; to be a place where the arguments, good and bad, heroic and even, in retrospect wicked, are tested and analysed and sometimes destroyed. We cannot do that if an orthodoxy rules too tightly, beyond the orthodoxy of tolerance – the sort of liberalism that enraged Herbert Marcuse.

One strength of this place is that we have some money of our own, and that makes it easier for us to make our excuses if the campaign of the day is led by government. We can easily agree to oppose the Government. It is not

only governments, however, who can be the enemy. Bullying by intellectual followers of the fashion of the day can be just as dangerous. We have not always in our history been immune to the tyranny of such fashion. Against it our best defence is that there have always been enough Fellows who have seen that collegiality is more important than the current doctrine, whatever it may be. They have understood that such collegiality is very fragile and very rare, and that without active commitment it can collapse. If it does collapse, then at the next switch of fashion those whose doctrines collapsed it will find themselves on the losing side against the next orthodoxy: serve them right, you may say. But the collegiality will have gone.

This is our day of commemoration; therefore a good day to remember what it is that our predecessors have left us. Of course, in the past this institution, like every other, went through lows as well as highs. The wonderful series of histories for which Green and Horden and others are responsible makes that clear. My own family is somewhat representative of the lows perhaps rather more than the highs. Claiming Founder's Kin, and eligible now that we had abandoned our Stuart and Roman Catholic allegiance in 1720, John Waldegrave became a Fellow in 1778. Then, much against the wishes of his parents who were supporters of the Colonists in the civil war we now call the American War of Independence he went to fight for his King and died of the yellow jack in Barbados before ever reaching America. He was buried not far from Codrington College.

Samuel, later Bishop of Carlisle, represents another strand: Founder's Kin but nonetheless winner of a Double First in the old sense, and a properly dour scholar and

evangelical to boot. He delivered the Bampton Lectures in 1854, arguing against the literalist interpretation of millenarianism then having a revival. My copy, released some decades ago from the Library of Oriel to the second-hand book trade, was I am sorry to say only partly opened during the century or so it was in the care of that College. He was not a Common Room man: he is one of very few never to have recorded a wager in the Betting Book. He did, however, badger his elder brother for decent silver to place on the table at Rose Castle: evangelical austerity has its limits.

We should perhaps today remember such marginal figures alongside our great men and women. They are all part of our history; even they, perhaps, contributed something to that sense of collegiality which it is our responsibility to preserve: a tiny contribution, in poor young John's case: namely his name inscribed on the back of a beautiful silver fork I once picked up at dinner. To me the immediacy of the contact with the dead boy was moving.

A college as we have received it has become a place where contrarian views can exist alongside orthodoxy, and where the only doctrine you sign up to is a duty to help to keep the outer fortification which protects that collegiality in good repair. It does not take all that much to breach it. History is full of the stories of seemingly impregnable fortifications breached as the result of the inattention of the defenders. Just a few more Genoese cross-bowmen might perhaps have saved Constantinople, after all.

Perhaps one reason for having people like me in Fellowship, who go out from the college and make a mess of various attempts to put the world to rights, is that we should return from time to time and tell you that you

should do nothing to make the college subject to people like us, nor to the causes for which we fight. What you should do is something else: be yourselves, be a College, a community, to use a much abused word. Attention and care is needed to fulfil this trite advice effectively: the balance, I need not tell those far more learned than I am, between the rights of the individual and the rights of the community is the oldest political argument of all.

The conclusion I bring back from a lifetime of work in politics and commerce is than I have noticed more communities of one kind and another going down that I have noticed new ones being built up; and that when people declaim, windswept banner in hand, *Fiat justitia, ruat coelum*, sometimes it does and squashes them flat. As Berlin taught us, quite often you have to muddle through with conflicting goods which do not fit into a hierarchy. Not always, of course: the bar to women in Fellowship was not a matter on which there could or should have been muddling through or compromise.

Barbara Wootton, the great criminologist, told me that when she became the first woman to deliver a lecture recognised by the University at Cambridge, the lectures were announced as by Professor Snooks, with a footnote, 'These lectures will be delivered by Miss Barbara Adam'. That was not collegiality: it was just nonsense. I would argue that the bar to women in Fellowship here itself made true academic community impossible. Perhaps that is sophistic. But such clear issues are quite rare. Often, if a compromise can be found which preserves collegiality, by the willing surrender of some part of some other good, it will be the right course.

Now indeed, I have delivered a sermon, in the very worst sense of the word. I apologise. It is just that given a pulpit I could not let the chance pass to say that this College is a rather special place, and rare, and worth great efforts to preserve; and that this Chapel is to me, feeble Christian though I am compared to Samuel Waldegrave, let alone to our latest Visitor, a central part of it.

So what is my message? Once, long ago, when I was a Minister of some kind, I was sent with a delegation to call on President Pertini of Italy, a good man, in his Palace on the Quirinale. He spoke, for some considerable time, in Italian as was surely his right, he being the President of Italy. At one point the lights failed; not the President's eloquence, however. Finally, the interpreter forced her way into the conversation. 'The President,' she announced, 'is congratulating you on your work and urging you to further efforts.' And off he went again. I will not, at least, do the latter. But his cheerful message is indeed the one I want to leave with you.