

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

Christmas Day

'And let us make this Chapel, dedicated to his pure and holy mother, glad with our carols of praise'.

Words, of course, from the Bidding Prayer that Dean Eric Milner-White wrote for the Festival of Nine Lessons back in 1918 and which were heard across the world by millions of people yesterday afternoon. Milner-White could never have anticipated the broadcasting sensation that our service was to become, or the reach, fame and iconic status that would be thrust upon this particular and peculiar college chapel. When he wrote those words he wasn't thinking that they would sound good in the United States or impressive in India or that they might cheer someone up in Africa. He was thinking about this particular Chapel and the need that there was at that time for people of the College, University and City to make an effort, a serious and concerted effort, to be 'glad'.

The shadow of loss fell heavily on this College in those days. Those who gathered here in 1918 would have been the bereaved friends of many whose lives had come to a violent end. If there was a predominant emotional tone it would have been grief rather than gladness. The Chapel would have seen many a tear fall and heard many a not-quite-stifled sob. And yet the young Dean declared that it was time to make the Chapel *glad*.

But how?

The answer was simple, straightforward and almost too obvious. The way to banish sadness and gloom is, 'to tell the tale of the loving purposes of God - from the first days of our sin unto the glorious Redemption brought us by this Holy Child'. For Milner-White, and for all those who, like him,

have been faithful to the love of God made known in Jesus Christ, the story, the tale, the great narrative of God becoming human to save humanity from itself is the ultimate source of gladness.

‘Gladness’ is a slightly archaic word to us today but if you were to turn to a thesaurus you would find it tucked up with words like ‘joy’ and ‘delight’ and ‘happiness’. Take those words a step further and you would find yourself in the company of ‘fulfilment’ and ‘flourishing’, and possibly even ‘wholeness’ - that form of health that is holistic and complete and somehow absorbs within itself any particular ailment that is causing pain to the body or distress to the mind.

For what we are talking about here is not the passing pleasure of a good sing, though it includes that, nor the fleeting moment of brilliant happiness that is extinguished when the booze runs out. What we are talking about is gladness that is fitting and transformative after a world war; the joy that makes sense even in the aftermath of bereavement.

The violent and tragic death of Jack Merritt and Saskia Jones at the Fishmongers’ Hall less than three weeks ago shocked the nation, and has precipitated a university-wide wave of emotion that includes grief, anger and pride: grief at the needless deaths; anger at both the suffering of the bereaved and the quickly grasped opportunity to exploit the loss for political ends, and pride in the nobility and forward-looking-ness and sheer undaunted hope that the Learning Together project embodied.

And in this College and Chapel we are still reeling, as Daniel Hyde put it last week at the Barbican, from the death of Sir Stephen Cleobury just over a month ago. Stephen's dedication to his vision of excellence and to the education of our choristers, choral scholars and organ scholars was legendary - but the legend in this case was true. No one ever worked more

tirelessly than he did to fulfil Milner-White's instruction and 'make this Chapel glad with our carols of praise'.

Over the course of his final five terms here Stephen set us another example, however, not one of musical aspiration or achievement but of how to cope with adversity. It was a generous and timely lesson and one that I know that the men and boys of our Choir took to heart. So let me take this moment not only to remember Stephen but to give public thanks and praise to the members of our Choir, young as they all are, for their extraordinary dignity and resilience during the uniquely challenging time of the last twelve months.

Our reading from the prophecies of Isaiah told us that 'the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light', that it was those 'who lived in a place of deep darkness on whom the light has shined'. And in that great passage that introduces John's gospel, we read that 'the light shineth in the darkness and the darkness comprehended it not'.

We read these same words year in and year out, but over this last year we have learnt a little more about the depth of the darkness. We have observed the resurgence of racism, the coarsening of politics, the trashing of truth, the fragmentation of communities and the increasing fragility of our institutions. We have become distressed by patterns of weather that confuse the rhythms of the plants and animals. And we have lazily blamed others for the all-too obvious shortcomings of our civic, social and political life.

But with every turn of the year it becomes even clearer that the darkness 'out there' is also a darkness 'in here'. The mental health crisis among young people cries out not only for more resources for care and support but for a realistic and sympathetic understanding of the pressures that they

face. For this has become a world in where we gorge ourselves stupid with fruit from the tree of knowledge known as our mobile device, and where it seems that absolutely everything is on shuffle-play. It is a world where the capacity to think has been replaced by the skill to do well in exams and where the demons that control our zeitgeist have convinced us that you can commit any sin you like but what you must never, ever, do is have faith that God is love and that God is more than a match for any human-generated pain or crisis or catastrophe.

A mean, proud and cruel god called 'cynicism' strides the face of the earth today, spreading the anti-gospel of insecurity while peddling false hope, encouraging petty resentment while inciting everyday hatred, and all the while inviting people to embrace the kingdom of self-centred darkness.

And yet it is to this world that the God of love reaches out; not with words of advice, not with thunderbolts of condemnation, not with hostility or anger but with a gift that is intended to evoke from us those qualities that are themselves most God-like - love, compassion, care, hope and a deep desire to serve others.

The gift that God gives to us is 'God's essence and his very self and presence all divine' as St John Henry Newman put it, but it is made known to us as 'the Babe lying in a manger', that is none other than the word made flesh, who is full of grace and truth.

Let us cast off the works of darkness. Let us refrain from worshipping false gods. Let us rather worship the God of love, making ourselves glad as we adore the vulnerability of the child in the manger and the endlessly creative and saving generosity of the eternal God of love.

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Isaiah 9 2-7; John 1.1-13*