

Address on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Chapel at Churchill College, 2017
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Spirit. Amen.

A village called Emmaus about 7 miles from Jerusalem. Some of those making the trek from the Porters' Lodge to the chapel in Churchill may very well have felt from time to time that the Sabbath day's journey between Emmaus and Jerusalem is being re-enacted regularly.

It seems at times, as if the chapel was built with a great cordon sanitaire around it to prevent the intellectual life of the University proper from contamination by superstition. Well it's not quite 7 miles now between the buildings of the college and the chapel. Has the distance closed in any other way I wonder? That surely is one of the questions we're bound to ask, celebrating this wonderful half-century of work and witness and celebration here. And perhaps it's worth, in answering that question, looking back to what else was going on in 1967, when some of us were quite young, and many of us were not even thought of.

The 1960s, as we're constantly reminded, was a period of optimism, of growth; a sense that history was going in a sensible direction, on the whole. And that optimism showed itself in several different ways. An optimistic approach to higher education. The great blossoming of new universities; new university courses; a new vision, a whole new vision of what higher education might be in an institution like Keele with its foundation year for everybody making sure that everyone had a common intellectual culture as they approached their work. A sense that that gift that higher education had to offer could at last be extended to an unprecedentedly wide public.

There was of course the white hot technological revolution promised by Harold Wilson's government in 1964. The sense that the advance of technology was irreversible and positive, once again opening doors and windows in all directions. And by 1967 there was another kind of revolution going on. Youth culture coming into its own. A sense that if we simply gave peace a chance, everything would indeed be alright in our world, and that people could be called to their better selves; to joy, reconciliation, a harmonised, pleasure-oriented, pacific world.

It wouldn't have been entirely surprising in 1967 if people felt that the road lead inexorably, irreversibly away from Jerusalem. Away from those disturbing, twisted images of obedience, and pain; of authority, darkness, failure and apparently magical reversal and resurrection. Now we know better. And in the '60s there were, as we all know, plenty of sociologists prepared to tell us that the advance of secularism was irreversible.

Yet, even in retrospect, that seems a rash judgement. 1967 was perhaps the high watermark; of optimism, of the positive spirit. We think that 2016 and 2017 have been rather bad years in some respects (but let's not go there); but 1968 was pretty bad. Beginning with the intensification of the hideous conflict in Vietnam, with the Tet Offensive in January '68, the year unfolded with the assassination of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy: two of the greatest icons of hope in that era.

Within 12 months of the opening of this chapel, the climate must've seemed a little different. As the years have gone on, we have come to be increasingly and rightly mistrustful of optimistic stories. Conflict came more sharply into focus in the late 60s. What seemed to be hidden, what seemed to have been overcome, became resurgent, murderous, threatening once again.

There was, after all, no one-way road away from the cross. Those two friends of Jesus, making their way to Emmaus after Easter; trying to leave behind them the sheer confusion, the fear, the pain that they had all shared. They must have been tempting models for many people. If only we could but now we can't.

One of the most remarkable features of the last 24 months or so, has been a sense, widely shared, of the ghosts of the 1960s rising up again. We have seen in the United States a resurgence of open racial violence that many of us would have thought would have been done with for ever. We have seen tensions and fears in East Asia, not in Vietnam this time, but throughout the region. We have seen a polarisation of political and public discourse, unprecedented for many decades.

A sense that – as one American friend of mine put it – everyone is running for the corners of the room. Just today you can find online a survey in which we're told that the American population believes that the United States is more divided than it has been since the years of the Vietnam war. The ghosts of the '60s: the unladen ghosts of conflict, of hope, and of disappointment, and the clear sense that no, we are not on a one-way road.

But in 1967, the building of a chapel, and the building of a chapel with such artistic confidence and integrity, is a powerful sign, a defiant reminder of the fact that in history there are no one-way roads.

Roads circle, and intersect, and seem to return again and again to that which is literally, physically, at the centre of this building. Humanity cannot run from the cross. The cross of its own suffering and failure. The cross of its rejection and violence. The cross which is the point at which the act of God steps in to the middle of that violence.

It's not that the gospel of Jesus Christ requires human failure or human misery to work, although it's a well tried evangelistic technique to make you feel much more awful before you can be made to feel better.

It's much more that as human beings grow up, they grow in an awareness of their limitations; the unmanageability of the environment outside; and the even greater unmanageability of the spiritual and moral ecology within. For us as individuals or as societies, there's no one-way road to the conquest of the reality that we are, the reality that surrounds us.

And we have finally two options: we can work very hard (and we do work very hard) at all those illusions that pretend we can in fact manage ourselves and our world; or we can embrace our limits, our failure, the awareness of the hurt we do and the hurt done to us,

and work from there. And what the Christian gospel says, is that when that embrace is honestly made; when people become aware of the limit; the vulnerability of their humanity and the humanity of their neighbours; something begins to turn in the economy and balance of the whole universe.

When we see beyond those moments of illusion that keep trying to tell us we're on one road towards control and power, peace and harmony; when we flirt with those mythologies that tell us there might just be an end to the confusion and complexity of human history as we know it, and a golden age to come; we need simple and stark reminders of what we can and can't do as humans.

And for all the mythology that surrounds his name, the man in whose honour this college is dedicated, Winston Churchill, was not a man for illusions of that kind. His stoic, unsentimental, sometimes ironic honesty, his candour about struggle and suffering in hard times is one aspect of his legacy that ought not to be forgotten, certainly not in this place.

We need all of us some space, some place in the world to make sense of our limits and our dependence: a place like this in fact. A place with open doors, with (as we have already heard celebrated in the service) windows out onto the natural world. A place where the cross hangs there centrally, inescapably. But not a place where you have to sign at the door, a form of membership, where you have to declare yourself instantly for or against a whole range of things. Simply a place where honesty is possible.

Well, as the two friends of Jesus walked their Sabbath day's journey, their 7 miles to Emmaus, we hear them pouring out honestly their confusion. We thought everything was going to be alright and it wasn't. We thought we, with Jesus, were on the right road to a future of triumph and justice and peace. And he died in horror and humiliation. We hear rumours of strange unmanageable events, of resurrection, and we can't cope with those unmanageable rumours. And so they speak with the space given by the silence of the stranger walking with them. And eventually, when that silence is broken, and when the bread is broken at the table they share with him, they know that they can go back into the world of pain and confusion; that they have been accompanied at every step of their journey by a force, an energy, a committed personal presence that will not let go of them in life or death. They can turn back to the world they have been trying to run away from because it's too difficult. Remade, reenergised with a new vision and find in the wonderful ending of that story that you know what - he's been already, he's been there before them.

Well, whether the gap has closed at all between the chapel and the rest of the college physically, is something we can measure with tapes, inches, kilometres, whatever. Whether the gap has closed in other ways is much harder to gauge. And yet, when we turn around from the doors of the chapel and find mysteriously that the physical bulk of the college is indeed a bit nearer than it used to be; we may well think that at least in the last half century we've had opportunity to become a bit more honest. Not much more successful, not much more kind or visionary, or even realistic, but it's much harder to deny the kind of world we're in. The kind of beings we are as humans. That's a start. Because in that honesty about our humanity, our inability to cope and conquer and manage, in that lies our hope, not because God delights in our weakness, but because God delights in our truthfulness.

When we understand the mixture of glory and muddle that each one of us is, and that each human society is, then perhaps we are opening a door to that greatest of all transformations, which is the way in which human relations come to be part of the body of Christ come to be a pattern of deep, mutual gift. We've heard a lot about gift this morning and so we should; and part of what we have to say to our world is that it's possible for a human community to live out of a depth of gift that we can barely imagine.

That's what we are called to. That's what the church constantly, stumblingly, and with the most uneven results possibly tries to live out. That's what this place is here for: to speak not against or even at an angle to the intellectual community, the wider human community, the cultural community; but to say in all these contexts: let's be truthful, let's be human. And paradoxically, when we've learnt to be human, God will help us to live divinely.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

(Transcription by Mark Gotham)