

A Sermon
Preached
in the Chapel
of
ALL SOULS COLLEGE
by
Robert Franklin
on
Sunday, 2 November 2025

When the Warden invited me to give a sermon, I hesitated, because I was not sure I had anything worthwhile to say. I'm still not sure. I'm not qualified to expound either theology or doctrine, or to presume to pronounce *ex cathedra* on a matter of faith and morals, though, in the distant past, I did tip a toe into the sea of canon law. I have only once given a sermon, to Berkhamsted School, when I was one of the College governors. Then, I argued that paradox is inherent in all religion and is a strength rather than a weakness. That is perhaps relevant to us as a college. We have our own paradoxes – a college without undergraduates, a college dedicated to rigorous academic research, necessarily often abstract and even unworldly, which yet cherishes a close association with the sphere of political, legal, and administrative affairs. Those paradoxes are a strength for us, too. We should embrace them, and certainly never apologise for them.

So I said to the Warden that my sermon would be secular and personal. A personal conviction is that, whether or not we believe, in All Souls College, on All Souls day, that we are compassed around with so great a cloud of witnesses, we ought to behave as though we were. Otherwise, I have a ragbag mind, and am far into my anecdotage, so this will be a series of musings, rather than a sustained argument. As a *very* amateur historian of architecture, my central strand will be the significance of

the college buildings, their effect on us as a society, and perhaps the lessons we can draw from them.

In *Gaudy Night* Dorothy L. Sayers has Lord Peter Wimsey say of his own college (I quote only from memory) “We are mortified in Victorian Gothic lest in our overweening Balliolity we forget God.” The sermon in our stones is rather different. We have two forms of Gothic, one practical and one fanciful, linked by a severely classical slype. Nor is that all. The hall ceiling has echoes of Borromini, the dome of the buttery is Mannerist, a riff on the Pantheon. But it has often been noted that the parts do make a whole – *e pluribus unum*. That unity is not accidental. John Simmons noted that Hawksmoor disciplined his fantasy Gothic with precise symmetry, and demonstrated great ingenuity in designing window openings Gothic without and classical within, and inserting serlianas into the external Gothic of the library and the common room. Hawksmoor himself, in his Explanation, made clear that he proceeded from an insistence on architectural decorum. From all this, I draw the moral that both discipline and ingenuity are essential to the success of the college, and that it is highly desirable that both should be pursued consciously, and with due care and attention.

Another message from the form of the original college is the importance of being a community of scholars. The pattern of fenestration in the front quad, alternating

single- and double-light windows, arises from the fact that the earliest Fellows lived in shared sets. The Common Room has pride of place in the Great Quad, rather than being tucked away, as it is in many colleges. It is no coincidence that two of our most beautiful rooms, the hall and buttery, are gathering places. There are sermons in memories, as well as in stones. Possibly my memories exaggerate the familial aspects of the life of the college in my early years in Fellowship. But to some extent they were real, and it gives me great happiness to know that they are real now. Obviously, this is not unique to All Souls. Most colleges perceive themselves as families to a degree, but a college without the changing population of undergraduates has the ability to form a closer family. I contend that, throughout my time, that family has included the college Staff, as well as the Fellows. The staff is now larger, and perhaps more disparate, than it used to be. Nor do I think there are quite as many long-serving members of it, such as Mr Quelch as butler and Mr Louth as scout. So, and this is the sermon lesson I wish to draw, it is all the more crucial to celebrate the role of the staff. One of the very best things that has happened in recent years was the commissioning of the staff group portrait which now hangs under the twin towers, appropriately enough, since they are the icon of the college, as Tom Tower is of my undergraduate college. I do hope, and urge, that other and further

testimonies to the broader college community and family will be forthcoming.

In a sense, the single greatest change in the college's built environment, to use that unappealing phrase, has been expansion beyond the High Street site, which is entirely confined to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, if one neglects the plague house. I would argue that there is a lesson even in that, namely, the acceptance of a wider role, and provision for it. We were accused of infirmity of purpose in the Franks report, more than half a century ago. But, in the matter of building plans, this college has wavered less than some others. It is perhaps a pity that we did not proceed with Talman's seventeenth-century scheme, which would have been very jolly, with gilded pinnacles and statues of Romish and reformed bishops, as well as placing us firmly in the orbit of the North Italian Baroque. But the rejection of Maxwell Fry's 1930s proposal for the replacement of the Manciple's house is less regrettable. True, it would have placed us in the vanguard of Oxford modernism, and given us an indirect link to the great name of Gropius, but it is an undistinguished design – its asymmetry is all too conscientious. Fry's contention that it would have been no more a clash of styles than the Warden's Lodgings (*not* originally Palladian) on the Gothic High Street frontage does not hold water. From this I draw the moral that we should not always strive to be at the forefront of what is

deemed to be, at any given moment, progress. There is a good deal to be said for allowing others to discover the unintended consequences of radical change.

On the other hand, while the college has not always been in the forefront of architectural innovation, there are occasions when it has been. The fan vault over the entry to this chapel is almost certainly the earliest such vault in Oxford. The Great Library is the first Oxford college to be on the ground floor, with the books protected from damp by brick vaulted cellars, which have also proved handy for the storage of wine. It is appropriate that Blackstone, who was almost certainly responsible for the creation of the common cellar, is commemorated by such a splendid statue above it. So the equal and opposite moral is not to be too afraid of primacy.

One of the earlier college buildings off the central site was another instance of straightforward modernism, even more undistinguished, the Beechwood flats for Visiting Fellows, which Warden Sparrow referred to, rather disobligingly, as Buchenwald. But since then we have done better. It was a disappointment that we were unable or unwilling to buy the Old Bank site opposite. When its purchase was mooted, I cherished the fantasy that there would be a link to it in the shape of a bridge over the busy High, like the Medici corridor in Florence or the papal runway to Castel Sant'Angelo. It was not to be, but the disappointment has been assuaged by the acquisition of

the Covered Market building. There is a sermon in stone there, too. Half a century ago, the phrase “the collegiate university” was not common parlance. Rather, there was marked tension between the university and the colleges, even suspicion of the intentions of each towards the other. That tension has largely dissipated. So it is appropriate that the Covered Market building will contain studies, which the college needs, and auditoria, which will be equally beneficial to the college and the wider university. Furthermore, the proposed improvement in the appearance of the shop fronts will enhance good relations between town and gown, a most desirable outcome. It would be well for us to be positively conscious of the symbolism of all this, and to seek to promote those ends however we can.

There are other qualities which the buildings silently commend. In the eighteenth century, we had a respectable record for economy and recycling. For instance, the columns of the Hall screen are reused from the demolished cloister. As one who remembers, from my earliest days in Fellowship, bursarial lectures to the effect that we were on the breadline, I rejoice in the relative prosperity that we have experienced since. But the moral to be drawn for this sermon is that we must always ensure that our resources are carefully husbanded and not overstretched.

There are other lessons from our buildings. One is the role of serendipity in determining their form. As Howard Colvin showed, the T-shape of this chapel and ante-chapel derives from uncompleted plans for Merton and New College chapels. Perhaps our plans for the college should embrace the effects of chance, and “events, dear boy, events”. Similarly, humour and surprise, desirable in the life of the college, are not immediately associated with buildings. But we have both. Hawksmoor was, obviously, a most accomplished classical designer. He also enjoyed the jokes of Mannerism, as exemplified by the oculus window immediately above the fireplace in the Common Room, where a chimney flue would be expected (the fire nonetheless drew very well), and the cunning inside-out Pantheon vaulting of the Buttery, mentioned earlier. Unfortunately, the effect of his calculated surprise in the Great Library can rarely be appreciated except at the Encaenia Luncheon, when entry through the central door seems initially to be into a smallish square space, before the full extent of the long room suddenly becomes apparent. It is an effect that he replicated elsewhere – a salutary lesson that things are not always as they seem.

The college should, also, bear in mind the symbolism of the buildings for the outside world, though, as Anthony Geraghty has suggested, their message may not be the one intended. Perhaps Hawksmoor’s Gothicism in the

Great Quad is linked to a clericalist view of the college, and that we ended up, as Geraghty puts it, in the “wrong buildings” for a more secular society. It is evident from without, too, that we do not have a spire to dream with. But we do better on “Towery city, and branchy between towers” The tree in the Warden’s drive has been called the most important in Oxford for its visual emphasis on the curve of the High. We have a duty to the city to look after it, not least because of the guilt of damaging its roots when Manciple Watson installed a turntable for Warden Sparrow’s Bentley. As far as I know, that was not even functional for long, if at all.

The most important relationship between the college buildings and the rest of the cityscape is that between the Great Quad and Radcliffe Square. If the Piazza San Marco is the finest drawing room in Europe, the view from the bench between the twin towers is of the finest drawing room in Oxford. The ogee cupola of the screen entrance complements the rotundity of the Radcliffe admirably. Talking of symbolic relationships with the outside world, there was even once a proposal to install microphones by the wrought iron gates, to learn what tourists were saying about the Fellows who could be seen within. It was rightly vetoed on privacy grounds – another instance of proper responsibility, and another salutary lesson.

As I warned it would be, this has been, designedly, a very personal sermon, if, indeed, it has been a sermon at all. I

am conscious that it has been rather pietistic, even sanctimonious, and that the lessons I have tried to draw have been strained. But I should like to conclude on the most personal note of all, a reflection on my own rooms, when I was living in college, more than half a century ago. They seem to me to have offered a parable of the comfortable coexistence of the old and the new which I would claim has a resonance for the college as a whole. My bedroom, the room above the main entrance to the front quad, formed part of the original Warden's lodgings, from which the comings and goings of the Fellows could be surveyed. It boasts a very fine quadripartite groined vault as a ceiling. I was very proud of what I believed to be part of the fifteenth-century structure of the quad, until I discovered that it was, in fact, a plaster facsimile, inserted in 1728. On the other hand, the two small windows towards the quad were, and I hope still are, equipped with shutters of utterly primitive woodwork, with the simplest of bolts, which run into crude holes in the stonework. It is likely that both shutters and bolts really are part of the original fabric. So I was much prouder of them.

Finally, no sermon, however secular, should wholly omit a blessing. We are greatly blessed in our buildings. *Gaudeamus igitur.*