A Sermon

Preached
in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

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on

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In the Ancient World, if you seriously needed advice about how to face life and its problems, one of your options was to make a journey to Delphi or another of the various major centres around the Mediterranean where you might expect God to give you some indication of what to do and how to think. Of course it is natural to feel a little dissatisfied, even a little cheated, if the answer to a problem comes too easily. The journey to Delphi was more efficacious if it cost some effort and discomfort. Approaching that awe-inspiring place, you would perform an act of ritual purification, and then tread your final winding way among the sacred buildings and shrines, up to the temple of the god. And when you arrived at his temple, to set yourself in the right mode of inquiry you looked up and saw, as we are told by some who did see them, three tersely worded pieces of moral advice, written up above your head somewhere in the front porch. Two of these – 'know yourself' and 'nothing in excess' – are, I believe, better known and more often reported than the third, 'avoid a pledge', or in a reported variant version – 'a pledge leads to disaster'. We may assume that much mental effort was expected in interpreting these words, and a great deal more in putting them into practice. And then the question might arise, and I like to think did arise: are these to be taken as independent maxims or as a trinity, which is somehow greater than the sum of its parts? Does that third one perhaps advise us not to be over-hasty in settling the first two – that is, in deciding what we are, or in thinking we know ourselves sufficiently, and judging too quickly what actually is due 'measure' and what is to be regarded as 'excess', no doubt differently for each one of us. Or could it be cautioning us against *any* certain and unconditional commitment – reminding us perhaps of the story told of

the dying man – the story is sometimes attractively but no doubt erroneously told of Voltaire - that on his deathbed he was visited by a priest and counselled at this extreme hour to renounce the devil and all his works, to which he replied that this was no time to be making unnecessary enemies.

The three maxims were, though, not the only such inscriptions and graffiti at Delphi, for we are told there were many more to be seen elsewhere in the sanctuary. We know of nearly a hundred and fifty of them. Individually many look like mere commonplaces of conventional wisdom – practise what is just, be kind to friends, and the like – but taken as a composite repertoire they are interestingly, and I would say *in principle*, 'open-ended', the collective statement of a moral culture and its preoccupations and consequent duties. I would contrast them in some ways with the tables of the ten biblical commandments which are seen written up in Hebrew or English facing the congregation from behind the altars of some English churches, these commandments being very specific rules for living and obeying. Though some of the Delphic maxims are more particular, even humorously so, such as 'know your judge', many of them invite, or enjoin, thought, self-examination, interpretation. 'Praise good things', states one, raising the question, or rather demanding the answer, of what precisely is to be identified as good. 'Be reasonable', or is it 'be grateful' (εὐγνώμων) – ancients such as Plato, as well as more recent commentators, have argued vigorously and productively over meanings and translations.

I suggest that acts of commemoration, be they of events, or persons, or even of an idea - such is today's Trinity Sunday, a feast day in many of the Western

churches including the Church of England - are similarly open-ended injunctions. The famously puzzling, or challenging, concept of the Trinity – a model of unity in diversity – is today the focus of celebration but also of thought and contemplation. Perhaps its best known early expression is found in the closing words of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, which have been adopted as a blessing at the end of church services and were heard in today's second lesson. In the verses immediately preceding this 'grace' is the entreaty to 'be perfected, be of good comfort, be of one mind', but I like to put these in the context of what must have been a good Jewish upbringing in Paul's early life before his conversion, an education in which questioning and debate was central – reach agreement, but only by using reason! Agreement and harmony are so much the more to be prized when these are reached after argument and the cooperative and reasoned defeat of dissent.

'Crown your ancestors', 'do not tire of learning', 'honour a benefaction', read other Delphic maxims. Putting aside for a moment those whose names are mentioned in our college list of benefactors, we might note that today is not only Trinity Sunday but June 11, the day on which in 1776 five men, members of the Continental Congress, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert R. Livingston and Roger Sherman were appointed to start work on the draft of what was to become the official declaration of American independence from Great Britain. It is hardly necessary to cite the words that emerged in the second part of the declaration – but of course I am about to do so, only first suggesting that they signal a longer-term project: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are

endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.' The commemoration of this statement entails an observation that, for all the self-evident truth they contain, not all people have yet attained equality, and for all that their creator endowed them with, it is hard to see that all in practice enjoy their 'unalienable rights'. In ten days' time the University welcomes, as first among its honorands at this year's Encaenia, a lawyer who has made considerable advances in this 'unfinished business' by dedicating his life to 'Equal Justice' in Alabama and other states.

We also know of cases of legacies for which we may feel some measure of discomfort over the origins or circumstances of a benefaction, and here too if we are in good conscience to look to our good fortune – perhaps some form of the so-called 'Vespasian's Maxim' which Edward Mortimer referred to here a year ago - *pecunia non olet* – we may feel it imperative not only to see that it is properly used but also to be honest and thorough in studying and admitting what can be known of the context of a bequest, and if need be recognising possible obligations and debts or even reparations that result. In this way, commemoration can also be renewal, an on-going sense of obligation, and an on-going search for meaning and truth. Another of this year's Encaenia honorands is a person who as a government minister presided over the opening of the Rhodes Scholarships to women. As I believe is commonly recognised, there can scarcely be a college or other institution in this University that could not, or should not, temper its enjoyment of inherited

benefaction with a sense of realism. We might remember Anthony Kenny's reflection on his applying for the post of Warden of Rhodes House when he was due to retire as Master of Balliol in 1987. 'I was given a stiff interview by the Trustees,' he recalled. 'One of the questions they asked was what I would feel about being identified with the name of Cecil Rhodes, given the misdeeds that tarnished his memory. I replied guardedly that, although I was no unqualified admirer of the Founder, I had known and valued many Rhodes Scholars. Only later did I think of the appropriate reply: that someone who for a decade had borne the name of a robber baron like John de Balliol could have no reason to jib at bearing that of Cecil Rhodes.'

Of course the shared obligation which commemoration surely entails is also, and just as importantly, appreciative gratitude for the blessings bestowed on us and our endeavours. If commemoration is to be more than the ritual memory and recitation of names – and here I have in mind that perhaps ungenerous and cynical definition of ritual as 'something we do when we no longer know the reason for doing it' – then, here too, renewal of commitment, or of ultimate purpose, is what gives it its meaning. In the theistic language of our Prayer Book, language which for many of us is truth expressed through beautiful metaphor, we are invited to thank God for that 'especial goodness' with which He has 'ordained man, not only to receive but dispense [His] benefits.' The thanksgiving continues with specific reference to individuals, with an additional safe catchall recognition of 'all our other benefactors'. But then the first part, that first arresting sentence, is picked up in words that look to the future, with the prayer that the blessings already conferred

may be the source of blessings to come. Such commemoration, then, reminds us of our place in a continuum, and connects our present inheritance with aspiration.

But perhaps we can go further than this. Those Christian words in the prayer book suggest that the greatest of our benefactors take god's blessings and themselves become the agents of further blessings, and thereby the agents of an imperative to seek, and to create, yet more blessings.

In his poem called 'The Pulley' George Herbert reveals something of his own understanding of the nature of human beings, and with beautiful economy and imagery expresses his truth in the form of a creation story. That truth, if I have correctly interpreted it, is that man is defined, by nature, over other animals by a sense of wonder and a longing for understanding, an aspiration which remains the most vital driving force in our individual and also communal lives. Is it not redolent of what Aristotle had in mind when he said, according to our text of his 'Metaphysics', that 'all men desire to know'? We regard the loss, when it occurs, of this longing, this urge, as pathological, an impairment of our human nature. I can think of few better ways to mark, at once, both our appreciation of what we have and our essential commitment to use, and to 'spread' that heritage, than to commemorate this great poet and Cambridge Public Orator, who for me personally provides a continuity, for which I am deeply grateful, from that London school where I taught, and where Herbert was a scholar in earlier times, and this college and its chapel, where I have learned more about his life and his poetry.

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by,
"Let us," said he, "pour on him all we can.
Let the world's riches, which dispersèd lie,
Contract into a span."

So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.

"For if I should," said he,
"Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should losers be.

"Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness;
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast."