

EMMANUEL COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE COMMEMORATION SERVICE

18th November 2015

I wonder if you can recall the first present you ever gave. What it was? Whom it was for? And why? And how old were you at the time?

I was seven. On a school trip to Bristol Zoo. The present was for my father. It took most of my pocket money for the day. It was something I knew he liked. It was a pork pie! I can't think what he made of the battered case of pastry that spent a hot summer's day squashed at the bottom of my school satchel. I don't even know whether he ate it! But I was pleased to have given it. And I have remembered that pork pie all of my life. My first gift.

A gift is a revealing thing. Of all the things in the world that could unveil the secrets of your heart a gift tells you the most about yourself.

The friends we make tell us something about our self; the books we read, the programmes we watch, even the enemies we make all tell us something about who we are.

But 'The Gift' is the most telling and revealing of all. 'The Gift' tells us what and whom we really love. And contemplating our earliest gifts can open the door to a deeper understanding of our self.

It was the invitation to preach today at this Commemoration that made me think about gifts because, as you know, this your College is a gift in every sense of that word. Benefactors gave of their wealth to build you a place of learning and to name it Emmanuel.

The church where I was first a vicar was similarly called Emmanuel, meaning 'God with us'. It's an interesting name for a place of learning. For if learning is about the pursuit of truth then it's not unreasonable to start at the very beginning, at the Alpha, and to explore to the very limits of the end, the Omega. The Alpha and the Omega, Emmanuel, 'in whom we live (and learn) and move and have our being'.

Of course, finding God in this world of 'Hell's despair' with all its contradictions and catastrophes is far from straightforward. Christian theology tells us that Emmanuel is to be found with us in the Scriptures, in the Sacrament, in the least and last and lost of our sisters and brothers and in Creation itself.

There's a story about Isaac Newton, the great scientist – perhaps apocryphal – having a model of the universe in his study. One day a friend who was also a scientist and an atheist called upon him. Seeing the model he asked Newton who had made it. Newton, being a good Christian, seized his opportunity.

"Made it? My dear friend, I just came down here this morning, and it just appeared out of nowhere, ex nihilo!"

The friend protested.

Newton pressed his point.

"My friend, if you refuse to believe that this simple model exists on my desk without a maker, how foolish of you then to believe that the real thing billions times greater could exist without a Creator."

If it is true that God made the world it is also true that he sustains it. He is the source of the energy that empowers the universe. I remember when our children were young pumping and pumping the spinning top until it spun and hummed on its own. All that energy transferred from me to the spinning top! Just as I supplied all that was needed to enable the top to be what it was designed to be and to do, so God spends himself in sustaining the universe. Creation is his gift.

Not just the original act of creation once upon a time, but its present existence.

Creation reveals God as the Giving God. He is forever giving. He never stops. God giving of himself to us as the Good Father, as the Saviour Jesus Christ, as the life-giving Holy Spirit.

You may know the famous Rublev Icon which is seen and understood as a portrayal of the three persons of the Trinity seated around a table at the centre of which is placed a raised bowl in which lies a lamb.

One day I was meditating on this image when the thought entered my heart that perhaps the three persons of the Trinity did once debate among themselves which of their number would rise to the challenge of giving of themselves to enter the world and become the Lamb from God that would save the world from destruction.

Whatever the divine prelude to the incarnation, the truth is that Emmanuel, God with us, is the fullest expression of the character of God as the one who ceaselessly gives. He is the Giving God. The Author of Gifts.

And if that is true (and I believe it is) then when we give of ourselves energetically, selflessly, unconditionally, sacrificially that is when we are most like God.

Your Benefactors gave – and whether consciously or sub-consciously – they imitated God.

When a child gives – out of simple and careless love – that is when a child is most like God.

I dare to believe that every gift of unconditional love – be it a child-like gift or that of your benefactors is an imitation of God.

And it prompts me to say that whenever you find yourself giving, selflessly, that is when you too will imitate the divine dynamic at the heart of the universe, when you too will be most like God.

And if in this place of learning you have learned how to give THEN you will bring glory to your benefactors and to the God of all good gifts;

And, in so doing will fulfil those lines of William Blake in his poem 'The Clod and the Pebble',

"Love seeketh not itself to please,

Nor for itself hath any care;

But for another gives its ease

And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair."

The Right Reverend James Jones

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