

DIAMOND JUBILEE OF THE MARY HARRIS MEMORIAL CHAPEL EXETER

7th OCTOBER 2018

Although it's a cliché, I'm deeply honoured to be your preacher for this 60th Anniversary of the Chapel. Some fifty years ago I was spiritually formed within these walls and under this ceiling, this 'web of light' – with its perfect acoustic which yesterday and today we've heard the Choir exploit so gloriously and magnify.

So many of my memories of Exeter are centred on three buildings – the Great Hall where Enoch Powell spoke following his River Tiber speech in Birmingham, the newly opened Northcott Theatre where the Gilbert and Sullivan Society packed them in with 'Yeoman of the Guard' and 'The Mikado' and this Mary Harris Memorial Chapel of the Holy Trinity where, believe it or not, we also packed them in! Not just for Carols and Concerts.

The Sunday before Finals began chapel attendance soared to capacity congregations as nervous students approached their day of judgement! Some of us gave this day a special name. Alongside Whit Sunday and Trinity Sunday we added Insurance Sunday! The prayer for the day was quite simple, "O God, help me pass my exams". All I can say is that it worked for me!

I'm not sure if that's what the Bishop of Exeter had in mind when on the 26th June 1958 he consecrated the Chapel. He circled the building on the outside and came to the closed West Door whereupon in this amazing acoustic the congregation chanted, 'Open, Open, Open'.

Dr Vincent Harris who was architect for the University College for thirty years designed and donated the Chapel in memory of his mother Mary. It was an extraordinarily generous benefaction. A gift that spoke of his love and his faith.

And it's worth contemplating in this age of self-discovery when people go to therapists as often as they go to priests: if you really want to know yourself, what makes you tick, then take a look at the gifts you give, the first and the last, to whom and for what, that will tell you more about yourself than any priest or therapist can! To paraphrase some words of Jesus, 'Where your gift is there will your heart be also'.

This Chapel stands as a memorial to love for a mother and the Lazenby Chaplaincy exists as a testament to another great woman in the University's history. In gifting and endowing the Chaplaincy Katherine Lazenby revealed herself, her vision and values. She stated explicitly that religion should be part of an holistic approach to student life and that both physical exercise and academic study should 'have equal opportunity to nourish a student's spiritual faculties'. In other words, body, mind and spirit together round a student's education.

Alongside the instinct for sex and survival she knew there were others – the social, moral and spiritual instincts.

(Improvise illustrative anecdote)

Few of us who saw out the old millennium and saw in the new one predicted that religion would play such a decisive role in the geopolitical dramas of the 21st Century. You cannot understand how America acts in the world without knowing how American voters read their Bibles and how to this day they link their 'manifest destiny' with the call of God 'to go to the ends of the earth' and make it their own. Nor can one understand the influence of Islamic culture without knowing that many Muslims recite the Koran in their struggle to bring to bear its vision and values on the nations of the world.

Furthermore, even in this age of diminished allegiance to institutional religion, you cannot ignore how Christianity has shaped the language, the literature, the learning, the leisure, the laws, the liberty and the landscape of British culture, not to mention the Monarchy and the whole constitution.

It is all part of a Christian conviction that because God loves the world he speaks his mind in order to shape it for good.

Such influence is not just historic, it is contemporary. It is the Church of England at a local level that ensures the voice of other faith communities is heard in times of celebration and sorrow and in discussions on how diversity can flourish. This all makes for social harmony. Indeed , the future stability of our society and of the world depends upon the strengthening of those relationships.

In our own country no-one should overlook the leadership that the Prince of Wales has given to this affirmation of the diversity of faith over many decades. For many commentators, the sight of him welcoming the Duchess of Sussex at the Chancel Step and leading her through the Quire of St George's Chapel to her husband and into the bosom of the Royal Family was a powerful symbol of integration and diversity.

You see Chapels still have their place in the public imagination!

Religion is in the fabric of our history. It cannot be laundered out. It is an indelible fact of our common life. It is in our future too.

Congratulations then to our University for recognising this truth through its international endowments, through the transcultural elements in its academic studies and through its progressive study of religion.

When the Chapel was dedicated one of the prayers was for 'unity, peace and concord'. That prayer is as relevant today. In its day it was about overcoming the divisions within Christianity; now it is about whether Jews, Muslims and Christians can share the same earth without blowing it apart. I believe that this University through its academic and cultural life which embraces the spiritual is contributing to that ideal of 'unity, peace and concord'.

I asked for today's reading from the New Testament. The first followers of Jesus were ordered by those in authority 'not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus' (Acts 4; 18). This episode begins and ends with noting that the disciples nevertheless 'spoke with boldness'. The word 'boldness' comes from Classical Greek and means 'freedom of speech'. Even though they were threatened with death they claimed what they believed to be their God-given human right to freedom of expression.

This biblical passage has been fundamental to the shaping of our civilisation and the human right, now enshrined in Article Ten, to freedom of speech.

It is a foundational principle of our institutions of learning. Social media may well be infected by toxic elements, broadcast media may well distort the public narrative, the press may well sacrifice truth for entertainment but the abuse of the media and abuse by the media should not be used to silence voices especially in our universities. It is the first step towards totalitarianism.

I began by referring to the Great Hall when half a century ago Enoch Powell came following his Rivers of Blood speech. Given the current debate about freedom of expression I wonder if today he would have been invited or even allowed to come on to any university campus.

I went and heard him which gave me the authority to dispute his analysis and doubt his predictions.

Had he lived I wonder what he would have made of the presence on that same stage 50 years later of the recent Chancellor, Baroness Floella Benjamin, embracing all her Playschool babies as they graduated into a world of such enriching diversity.

In a university we learn to outwit rather than outlaw.

I said that the freedom of expression was a human right. But with the eyes of faith, with the eyes of Mary Harris and Katherine Lazenby, I believe that the freedom to speak your mind is also a divine right. After all, speaking your mind for the common good is exactly what God was doing when out of love he sent Christ the controversialist into the world.

The Right Reverend James Jones KBE