

Final Worship; Address

John 17.20-26

**Churches Higher Education Liaison Group
September 2011**

**Sustaining Community: in the Church, the
University and the World
(in the Light of the Government's White Paper)**



Introduction

It is a great joy to be here and I want – by way of introduction – to give three contexts and then look at the three main elements that we have been considering in this conference. So I have entitled this sermon, ‘Sustaining Community: in the Church, the University and the World (in the Light of the Government’s White Paper)’!

The three contexts, then: first, my personal context. We worked out last night over dinner that this is the twenty fifth CHELG since I first came here as a chaplain in September 1987. I can not claim to have been at all twenty five conferences, though I have been to an awful lot of them. It has been a conference – and a context – which has sustained me through my ministry as Chaplain at Exeter University and then as Dean of King’s College London. It is always a joy to come here and catch up with old friends and remember old events that happened here.

Anyway, one of the things which emerged out of this morning’s feedback sessions was about a community to sustain us as chaplains to Higher Education Institutions. I do think that this is a really important network to do that. ‘A springboard for the new year,’ was one of the things which was mentioned in the feedback session this morning, and, ‘finding old friends, meeting new friends.’ It has been a context in which chaplains and lay assistants have worked together in their different callings and in which different denominations have worked together in their different ways. Increasingly, with the virtual community – with email, blogs, discussion groups and so on – I want to commend this conference to you as a way of sustaining community. I don’t think I could have done all that I have over these past twenty five years without the input of these conferences. So that is my own context.

The second is obviously the context of this conference: the Government White Paper on Higher Education.¹ In the three talks you had put before you from the conference organising committee, you have been looking at the theme of sustaining community: individually, institutionally and globally. I was very glad that Professor Les Ebdon was able to be here and very sorry that I was not able to be here myself to hear him

¹ <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/higher-education/docs/h/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf>

(although I am glad to have seen the PowerPoint of his talk). Of course, he talked a lot about the paradigm shift of the White Paper, 'putting the student at the heart of Higher Education.' He did at least begin with a reflection on Humboldt and Newman and the idea and purpose of the University and ended with the key issues and challenges about community, about pastoral models and the implications of these models for students. Then with Sir Ghilleen Prance you have been challenged on how to live sustainably in our environment and how to sustain the world for the future. It was slightly more difficult to tie down what you all thought about Barbara Glasson's talk on 'Individually'. A 'scatter gun approach' was mentioned, 'not linear,' and using all sorts of interesting words apparently. 'Signs of life with an eightfold model' – although no one could remember all eight! – with reflections on what it means to be a host.

Thirdly, I want to refer to all three of those talks in these reflections in the context of John 17 which we have just heard read. I am sure that you are all familiar with John 17. It is one of the classic bits of Johannine language and theology that just seems to go round and round and round. John has a remarkably small vocabulary and uses these words repeatedly. One has this vision of a doddering old man saying his prayers and just meditating and meditating and meditating – and getting even deeper into it. In what we know as the High Priestly Prayer of John 17, Jesus prays, at the end of the last supper, at the end of the farewell discourses, in three sections. He prays for himself in verses 1-5; he prays for his disciples in verses 6-19; then he lifts his gaze and prays over the heads of the disciples for all of those who will come to believe through their witness, in other words, for us, in verses 20-26. Throughout John 17, the word 'world' echoes as a constant refrain in the background. In 17.19, it says that Jesus is praying *huper, on behalf of or vicariously* for them and for us. And then in verse 20, Jesus is praying *peri, about*. Both of those things are very important, illustrating this whole notion of the intercessory aspect of the second person of the Trinity: praying on our behalf and for us.

So that is my personal context, the context of this conference and the context of John 17. Now we turn to the three main themes of the conference.

1. Sustaining Community Individually

Sustaining community individually, of course, picks up the contemporary stress on the individual. When I was first here for CHELG at High Leigh in 1987, someone called Margaret Thatcher was still in Number 10 Downing Street, who had interesting ideas that there was no such thing as society. It was at the time when she and her dear friend Ronald Reagan abolished the Glass-Steagall wall which Franklin D Roosevelt put in place to separate ordinary banking from risk investment banking after the 1930s Wall Street Crash, so that the world would never again have to face the situation where bankers would be taking risks with ordinary people's money. It was Thatcher and Reagan who abolished that wall in the 1980s and we are now reaping the consequences of that action. They abolished it in the name of there being no such thing as society: the real driving force would be the individual's personal financial advancement. What the Christian Church had called for 2000

years one of the deadly sins, 'greed,' was rebranded as the main cardinal virtue as 'value for money.' We find ourselves now with fat cats and bankers grabbing what they want, and then complaining about rioters going into shops and grabbing what they want.

The White Paper puts the student at the heart of Higher Education. The student is to invest in their future. Students are to put themselves into debt to improve themselves and to gain economic benefit for themselves for the future. Christian theology has traditionally said that putting the self at the heart of anything is the definition of original sin. You only find yourself by losing yourself: take up your cross and deny yourself, put others and God first (Mark 8.34-37). In my student days – along with all sorts of other Jesus/One Way stickers on my acoustic guitar which I thrashed to death – was a little one that had J-O-Y; joy is Jesus, Others, You. Just because it is twee and I am embarrassed about it now, does not mean it is not true.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes this as Ubuntu Theology: we only exist in relationship to others. We only know who we are in relationship to others. If you want to think of yourself solely as an individual, you will lose yourself.

In John 17.23, Jesus talks about, 'I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.' This phrase, 'I in them and you in me', echoes right at the start of the farewell discourses in chapter 14 where Philip comes up with a minor theological question: 'Show us the Father and we shall be satisfied'. Jesus' reply, of course, is to say, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?' (John 14.8-10) This interpenetration of the Father and the Son, which runs throughout John's Gospel as a whole, and particularly through this prayer, is at the heart of it. We only know who the Son is in relationship to the Father, and we only know who the Father is because the Son has revealed him. We only know who we are in relationship to others, and if it is good enough for the Trinity, it ought to be good enough for us. Jesus goes on to pray in verse 24 that they 'may be with me where I am'. And, in the final section, in verse 26, that, 'the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.' We can only grow in community; we can only be sustained in community. You cannot be sustained or sustain life alone. Genesis 2.18: 'It is not good that the man [or humankind] should be alone.'

Barbara Glasson was talking about the signs of life and her eightfold stage. I gather that a number of you were quite pleased that she managed to use the theological and biblical term, 'crap' from the speaker's platform. Some of you found that liberating, some of you found that challenging: but it *is* a biblical word. In Philippians 3.8, Paul says that he counts everything as 'crap,' *skubala*, building on what he said in verse 7, counting everything as 'loss' for the sake of knowing Jesus Christ. At the heart of every PowerPoint slide on the screens here that I have seen since I have been here, is somebody with a handful of crap out of which something green is growing. You might call it 'compost.'

Community is inevitable as the compost if we want to have individual growth. It is out of the 'crap,' out of the difficulties of ordinary life, that we grow as individuals, that we are stretched, we are changed, we are challenged. One of the saddest things about Alzheimer's is, of course, that people forget who we are. Even sadder, though – and this is the title of a book that has challenged me for many years, written by David Keck (son of Leander Keck, Professor of New Testament at the University of Yale) – is *Forgetting Whose We Are*²: forgetting that we are somebody's husband, wife, mother, father, brother, sister, lover, friend. The saddest thing about watching someone losing themselves and losing their memories is that they lose their relationships: they don't remember not just *who* they are, but *whose* they are. But the important thing is that they go on being our brother, sister, parent, friend, even when they don't know that that is who they are. And that is what sustains them. Community is the place which sustains individuals in mutuality and intimacy.

Someone said, in the feedback session, that we haven't defined community yet. In the Latin, *communis* is to bind or tie together, meaning linking one person with another person, being together. So you can't talk about individually without talking about community.

2. Sustaining Community Institutionally

This takes you therefore inevitably into the 'Institutionally': into the Church and into Higher Education. But first, into the Trinity. You might not want to use the word



institution of the Trinity, but it is an institution of relationships. If we go back to John 17 again, Jesus prays that they may all be one, 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us [...] so that they may be one, as we are one.' (17.21) And then in verse 26, it once again picks up this same idea that 'the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'

In the middle of the chapel at King's College London, we have a beautiful icon painted by Patsy Fostiropoulos. It is a modern version of the Rublev icon: the famous icon of the three figures sitting around the table under the

oaks of Mamre when Abraham welcomed the three strangers (Genesis 18.1-8) and

² Keck, D. (1996) *Forgetting whose we are: Alzheimer's disease and the love of God*, Nashville: Abingdon Press

which has traditionally been viewed as an image of the Trinity. Those of you who know anything about icons will know how those three figures form a perfect circle. There is another important technical term I want to use, which I also gather Barbara used: *perichoresis* – the dance within the Trinity, the dance of love at the heart of the cosmos. In Rublev’s portrayal of the Trinity at table they are as host. Again, ‘host’ was another theme that you have picked up this week. I’m sure that many of you have done as I have done and sat in meditation before that icon and noticed that there are three figures seated around a four-sided table. The centre of the circle is open and we are inevitably drawn into the circle of love. We find ourselves – and know ourselves – as we join the eternal *perichoresis*, the eternal dance of love between the Father, the Son and the Spirit. That means that Church too must be an institution of love and relationship. It is crucial because institutions are the way in which we relate to one another, the way we form and organise community.

Particularly when I first came to the CHELG conference, in the 1980s, I was struck by how many chaplains were kind of Davy Crocketts, out on the lone frontier. They were not very happy with Church, not very happy with each other and some of them not very happy with themselves! Chaplaincy is a tough job: often you are in a portakabin on the edge of campus, nobody really wants you, the Church doesn’t want to pay for you and keeps cutting your funding and the Vice Chancellor wonders what the hell you are doing in his institution and all that kind of thing. That is why that lone-wolf nature of the wild frontier needs to be earthed in this community. Chaplaincy has to be, in the words of the Bishop of London (one of his favourite terms for what we are trying to do at King’s), ‘amphibious’. That makes us sound like a bunch of toads I know, but it is this idea of being on the frontier, of being at the borders, of being able to go back and forth between Church and society and University and so on. Which also means, of course, that we have to be ecumenical: John 17.22, that famous verse ‘so that they may be one, as we are one’ (which of course is the title of a papal encyclical³). To quote from a commentary I wrote some time ago, ‘the disunited Church is a scandal to the Gospel and a stumbling block for the world, but the path to unity will be found more in loving and living and working together than in ecclesiastical reorganisation.’⁴

It was Tertullian in the second century who said that the pagans notice us and notice Our Lord when they say, ‘See how these Christians love one another.’⁵ When people say that today, they usually say it with a sense of exasperation or sarcasm. This is why it is important that CHELG is ecumenical, even though sadly we are still fracturing the body of Christ by not being able to be hosts together and share the bread and wine together. Chaplaincy is one of the places where ecumenical teams work very significantly.

But if we are in the institution of the Trinity and in the institution of the Church, we are also in the institution of Higher Education. We are back to the White Paper and

³ John Paul II, May 25, 1995, *Ut Unum Sint (That they may be one - On Commitment to Ecumenism)*

⁴ Burridge, R. (1998, 2008) *John: The People’s Commentary*, Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, p203

⁵ Tertullian (circa 200AD) *Apology*, Chapter 39.7

the Chaplains' letter to the press about this utter rampant individualism and its effect upon the market system.

I was glad that Les' talk began with an opening history of Higher Education and concluded with the challenge about what this means today. For me, coming here for the first time in 1987, it was Professor Dan Hardy, the great theologian from Cambridge, who was talking about the purpose of the University and going back to Newman's idea of the University and so on. And I remember in 1994, Graeme Davies (then head of HEFCE and then later Vice Chancellor of the University of London) beginning to look at the way in which Higher Education was expanding. This led me to write my inaugural lecture as Dean of King's, *The King's Values? Consumer Culture and Higher Education*, on King's values, looking at Plato and Socrates and the way in which, in the fifth century, the academy was placed in the middle of the *agora*, the market place, next to the temples: so that faith and business could be challenged by thought.⁶ I pointed out that in the changes to Higher Education in the early 1990s, the *agora*, the market place, had taken over the academy. This is even more the case now. The famous phrase, 'Tesco ergo sum' ('I shop therefore I am') then became the title of an article I then wrote for the Times Higher.⁷ Many people have heard me go banging on about this ad nauseam for twenty odd years (at the recent conference for CUAC⁸ – Colleges and Universities of the Anglican Communion – and so on).

When I did my inaugural, I raised the question then of whether the student was raw material or whether the student was the customer. At the time, it looked like the student was going to be raw material and that our customers at HE were going to be government and society who had asked, 'Which institution will give us fifty doctors at what price?' You worked out the 'value added' to the student by subtracting their A level results from their final degree and that told you how much value the University had added to them through the factory process! But increasingly, the student was being looked at as customer. Now, of course, the new White Paper has come down very heavily on this aspect. It is the students who will determine which subjects survive according to the White Paper. Those that they vote for and spend their money on will survive, and those that they don't won't. There is no suggestion as to whether actually society might need some subjects to be preserved.

Universities in the UK have been closing science departments. There is not a single Chemistry department in this country which pays its way, and Chemistry department after Chemistry department has been closed in the past ten years as student numbers have been insufficient. Can Britain survive in the new world with no science departments? The students will decide by their votes and where they pay to go which universities will survive. I want to say that chaplains are called to stand full square in the middle of this rampant individualism in the institutions of Higher Education and say we want to stand for community: we want to pray for people, we

⁶ Burrige, R. *The King's Values? Consumer Culture and Higher Education*, 9 October 1995, <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/content/1/c4/56/37/inaugural.pdf>

⁷ Times Higher Education Supplement, October 1995

⁸ <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/structure/dean/sermons-section/cuac.html>

want to care for them regardless of their belief or background. The way we work ecumenically means that we don't just serve our own brand of students but that we serve everybody. We need to do something about incarnating community in the increasingly virtual communities of universities, where people will only talk to one another by email. One of the most useful things that the chaplaincy at King's does is regularly to organise parties of strawberries and pimm's. At these, people meet one another in the flesh and realise that this is someone they have been talking to via email or telephone all year long but they have never actually met. At the heart of Christianity is, I think, something about incarnation. Tim currently has no office and is not desking in the sacristy, but actually an awful lot of his ministry I know goes on in the cafeteria and in the pub (at least that is what he tells me!). So ministry individually, ministry institutionally and then of course the third strand was globally.

3. Sustaining Community Globally

The word 'ecumenical', from the Greek *oikoumene*, means the whole inhabited globe. In the 'All Are Welcome' song we just sang, I was thinking of Archbishop Desmond Tutu preaching in King's College Chapel (which he does from time to time as one of our alumni). It's wonderful: he says, 'All are welcome' and gets more and more excited, and stretches his arms as wide as he can and repeats *all* and *all* and *all* and *all* and usually knocks the microphone over. That means that the impulse of the love within the Trinity, that makes us form a community of relationships within our institutions, drives us out into the world. There is this anxiety about the world that runs throughout John 17 and it looks pretty negative. In John 17.6, it says, 'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from [out of] the world' and in verse 9 we have the extraordinary thing where Jesus says, 'I am not praying for the world, I am praying for those you have given me,' going on to say in verse 14 that 'the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.' It is so negative that many of you will know, I am sure, the important New Testament theology book by Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus*,⁹ arguing that John's gospel is essentially world-denying and world-hating.

So are chaplains to ignore the global connection? Not on the basis of John's Gospel as a whole certainly. If you do an analysis of the word 'world' in John, you will find that it breaks down into three groups: in one group, the phrase is completely neutral (e.g. the whole world has gone after him, as in the French '*tout le monde*', everyone has gone in John 12.19). In the other two groups, one has a positive association and one is negative. By and large, the positive references are gathered in the first half of John's Gospel and the negative in the second half. The world is the object of God's love from the Prologue onwards (John 1.9-10), leading of course to John 3.16 ('God so loved the world'). It is as the ministry of Jesus is increasingly rejected by the world, so the hostility and negativity develops throughout the farewell discourses, eventually here in John 17 to the most negative. Käsemann was just looking at John 17 in his book. But these verses in 17.20-26 take us back to the world to believe and

⁹ Käsemann, E. (1968) *The Testament of Jesus: a Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, London: SCM

to be able to save it, back to John 3.16. Of course, chapter 17 is followed by chapters 18 and 19 and the death of Christ for the world (18.37). It is like an image of fountains where individual receptacles of water are filled up so that they overflow into a larger collecting urn or basin (it might be the Church, it might be your University). This is how the individual dimension feeds into the institutional. As the water continues to flow, it overflows out into the streets and becomes the streams of living water for the healing of the nations and the eschatological vision of Revelation 22.1-5.

The unbridled economic individualism behind the White Paper says 'benefit myself and let the world go hang.' This takes us back to my comments about fat cats and rioters. But, as I am sure Sir Ghillean Prance will have said, it is precisely that attitude which has led to the environmental crisis facing our world and the fact that we simply cannot sustain this lifestyle. We must expose the siren voices that are saying we can grow our way out of the financial crisis as we store up trouble for the future, literally mortgaging our children and grandchildren's future when they can't get a mortgage because they already have so much student debt. Individual Christians are sustained in the community of the Holy Trinity through the *perichoresis* of the divine love which overflows into the life of the Christian community to become the Church, the bride of Christ, beautiful whatever its flaws so that we can build and sustain community in our institutions of Higher Education. We do not love one another so that we can have nice warm fuzzy feelings for our fellow Christians. The image is not one of a gas ring burning bright with the flames all pointing inwards. It is so the world may believe if we go back to John 17; it is so that 'the world might believe' in verse 21 or in verse 23 that 'the world might know you have sent me' and similarly in verse 25.

Ten years ago, I wrote the following words: 'the world does not naturally ponder the internal relationships of the Holy Trinity, but when it sees Christians living self-sacrificial love, then it is challenged to think again.'¹⁰ They are even more true today. It is so that we can transform the world into the vision that God wants to create. Yes, that means the physical environment. That is why STEM is important (Science Technology Engineering and Maths) and all the things Ghillean will have talked about in relationship to the *physical* environment and why the partnership with health schools is particularly vital as we care for the *physical* environment of the world and one another. But it must also be the *intellectual and cultural* environment. A government that wants to cut all the funding for arts and humanities will just simply impoverish us. It is also the *spiritual* environment, the importance of prayer and worship at the heart of our ministry.

Conclusion

King's College London is allowed to occupy the land of the old royal palace of the Savoy next to Somerset House on the condition that we continue to have Christian prayer on a daily basis and our college prayer which is on our website¹¹ talks of the

¹⁰ Burridge, *John*, p202

¹¹ <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/structure/dean/chaplaincy/prayer/college.html>

'seeds of learning and virtue here sown bringing forth fruit for your glory and the benefit of our fellow creatures'. The vertical and horizontal dimensions, church and world, that what we are doing is for the glory of God and the benefit of others, what we now call at King's, 'in the service of society.' This all leads to that eschatological vision that comes at the end of John 17 in verse 24: 'I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.' It is because the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father and – in the Spirit – that dance of love, *perichoresis*, brought into being the cosmos in the first place. It is because we are invited to be part of that community that we then go out into the global environment and try to take the love of God. 'In the End, therefore, we love each other not for our own sakes, nor even so that the world may believe, but because this is how we share the very life of God and come to be with him and in him for ever and ever. Amen.'¹²

¹² Burridge, *John*, p203