

UNIV 750th SERVICE OF THANKSGIVING

Proposed reading for the Master to read in the Service:

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

Hebrews 11.1-2; 12.1-2; 13.8, 14-16.

Univ.'s 750th Thanksgiving Service

St Mary the Virgin, Oxford

Heb. 11.1-2; 12.1-2; 13.8, 14-16

21st May 1999

YESTERDAY, TODAY, FOREVER.

INTRODUCTION

Today we give thanks to God as we celebrate Univ.'s past, present and future, the last 750 years, today's exciting developments and the challenges ahead, and we pray that the College may blend change with its own distinctive tradition. This mixture of past present and future is part of my experience of Univ., from undergrad days, through doing some of my doctoral research here and then returning regularly for the libraries and to write some of my books at the College. I see both changes and continuities, radical new departures, like finding girls in the College - legally! - counterbalanced by some things staying forever the same - like certain Dons!

Staying the same during constant change is also at the heart of the Christian faith. God is the One who is changeless, yet who renews everything: thus, 'I the Lord do not change' (Mal. 3:6; see also James 1:17), but 'See, I make all things new.' (Rev. 21:5; cp. Isaiah 43:19).

The letter to the Hebrews grapples with continuity and change, God being forever the same, while he creates, develops and re-creates everything anew. I grappled with it myself here some twenty-five years ago, getting a commentary on Hebrews out of Pusey House library to help. As the Master read, 'Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever', and yet that eternal changelessness is set in this tremendous sense of looking back and straining forward. So let me take 'yesterday, today and forever' -

and see how they apply both to the letter to the Hebrews and to Univ. at 750.

1 YESTERDAY

Hebrews:

'Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday' directs our attention backwards at first. Hebrews describes faith as 'the assurance of things hoped for'; 'our ancestors received approval' because of their faith, the way they trusted the promises of God - and Chapter 11 is a long list of the heroes of faith, from Noah, Abraham and Sarah through Moses and David, even including 'Rahab the harlot' (11.31) until the writer says 'time would fail me to tell' of countless men and women who kept the faith under persecution, desperate affliction and need. He appeals to them as 'so great a cloud of witnesses' (12.1), but it is a 'cloud of witnesses', not a crowd of spectators. They are not there to watch us as we run the race of faith; we honour them as those who have run before us and won the prize. We look to them, for encouragement, so we can emulate their example.

Univ.:

And Univ., too, has its 'cloud of witnesses', who have run the race before us. The Bodleian exhibition, next on today's programme, is full of stories of 'yesterday', the last 750 years from the benefaction of William of Durham in 1249 of 310 marks to found the 'Great Hall of the University'. 'University' means turned in 'one direction', *uni-versus*, to read together (what 'Col-lege' means), to study together the 'universe', all that God has created. Univ. has been turned to the Crown since at least the 1380's, with the legend of its foundation by Alfred, the 'scholar-king'. In 1592 Queen Elizabeth I went down the High with an oration at every College and responded readily 'with great affability in the Latin tongue', while Charles I's stay in Oxford during the civil war required Univ. to help fund his supporters! James II came in 1687 to view that rare statue of him in the Main Quad - and the Crown has been our Visitor since 1727, leading up to today's occasion.

Other witnesses include St Cuthbert, the College's patron saint - and many have emulated him in becoming priests, bishops and even archbishops - like George Abbot, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1611 who regrettably is remembered for shooting one of his servants while hunting; I am glad to report that the Bishop of Oxford and I were at tea at Lambeth Palace last week, and there was no sign of George Carey following that example!

Our forbears encourage involvement in society. The 33 members of the University College Club of 1804 included 12 MPs, 3 Privy Councillors, 2 Cabinet members, 2 Lords Lieutenant, 3 Knights, 3 Baronets, 4 Peers and 4 Clergy. And now I find, like Hebrews, that 'time would fail me to tell' of the poet Shelley, sent down in 1811, or Prince Yusupov, assassin of Rasputin - or of incidents like when the whole College was sent down because of screwing up Dean Chavasse's door in 1880.

These, and many others, are our 'cloud of witnesses' to whom we look for inspiration, to emulate their scholarship and contributions to society - if not necessarily all their deeds!

2 TODAY

Hebrews:

Secondly, 'so great a cloud of witnesses', says Hebrews, inspires us today, to 'lay aside every weight and sin' which holds us back, to 'run with perseverance the race set before us' (12.1). The New Testament often uses athletic metaphors, of running the race, competing and winning prizes for the life of faith. Above and beyond all the witnesses, we are to look to Jesus, the same 'yesterday and today' (13.8), 'the pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (12.2) - the one who was to the first to run, marking out the path for us and also the one who is the finisher, who makes the race perfect through his sacrifice on the cross.

Univ.:

And this mixture of struggle and competition, of winning prizes and making sacrifices is also true for Univ. today. The College's contributions to modern society include Clement Atlee and Harold Wilson at home, with Bob Hawke, former Prime Minister of Australia and President Clinton abroad. There is the welfare reform of Beveridge, the writings of C. S. Lewis and the expanding universe of Stephen Hawking. Even now, my contemporaries are making their contributions from the Prime Minister's staff to banking, from the church to the Bar, in business or the arts and media, across humanities and sciences alike.

The prizes for Higher Education have perhaps never been greater - nor indeed the struggles and the competition. During my time, and since, Univ. has performed consistently well in the Norrington Table and on the river, academically and in sports - as befits a well rounded education. I am grateful for this approach in a College which both gave me my degree studies and awoke my faith in God, so that I strain to use what I learned in sacrifice for others. The struggle to maintain such quality and style of education is intense in today's highly competitive Higher Education sector, with its expanding numbers, and debates about costs and funding. What might it mean to look not only to 'the cloud of witnesses' of yesterday and today, but especially to the sacrifice of Jesus, the 'pioneer and perfecter' that the race may be run for his glory and the good of others?

3 FOREVER

Hebrews:

The answer comes from Hebrews' third dimension, from yesterday and today, to the future where Jesus Christ is the same 'forever' (13.8). The temptation is to become complacent, to stop going forward and to settle down. So the metaphor moves from running races to journeying as the writer says that 'here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come' (13.14). On the way, we continue with sacrifice, offering both 'a sacrifice of praise to God' (13.15) and the practical sacrifice of 'doing good and sharing what you have' (13.16).

Univ.:

So too for Univ.: impressive though a 750 year history may be, we cannot be complacent and settle down; we have to keep going, 'looking for the city that is to come', and making sacrifices. It can even feel like we are being crucified sometimes in universities today! It is good that the College wants to maintain its community life at about the same numbers, rather than join in the mass expansion of Higher Education. To do that and to maintain the vital tutorial system will be costly - which is why the College Appeal is so important. I am pleased about the large sums already raised for Fellowships and to endow others to provide this for the future. But I am also delighted that we are funding scholarships to enable access for students from *all* backgrounds, rich and poor, home and overseas. This is what Hebrews calls 'doing good and sharing what you have', a sacrifice 'pleasing to God'. As we look back at the cloud of witnesses from yesterday and the contributions of today, this tradition of public service, educating leaders in the service of city and community, for our country and the world, is vital. As we look forward to the turn of the Millennium, and on to Her Majesty's Golden Jubilee, the future calls us to emulate this life of sacrifice and service.

CONCLUSION

Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever. Sometimes, looking back at the last 750 years, looking around at life today, and forward to the challenges of tomorrow, Univ. also might feel always the same, while constantly changing. Yet 'here we have no lasting city' - all human institutions will eventually come to an end, even one as long-lived as Univ. So as we celebrate yesterday's cloud of witnesses, and our contributions to society today, we must look forward to Jesus as 'pioneer and perfecter', to emulate that life of sacrifice, putting our faith in the unchanging nature of God, who is always the same in his love and yet who makes all things new, who calls us through his good future to himself, to the 'city which is to come' where all will be 'col-legged',

collected together in him, unified and 'Univ.-fied', turned in the one direction of his love, for us and for all the universe. Amen!

The Rev'd Dr Richard A Burridge
Dean of King's College, London

Sermon: 9.4k; 1640 words, plus 200 words for the reading.