

*Trinity College*

Sermon, Choral Evensong, Sunday 13 August, 2017

I have been and I suspect always will be, a visitor of churches. Anywhere I find myself if I walk past an interesting looking church, I'm inside as quick as you can say 'Welcome to St. Swithyn's in the Mist, East Upper Derby on Tyne.' Travels invariably involve cumulated hours on end in a whole variety of churches. A recent trip to Darwin in July saw me at the Anglican Cathedral there marveling at the fact that Midnight Mass had finished only one hour before Cyclone Tracy destroyed the town, killed hundreds and reducing the Cathedral to rubble. There's an extraordinary thing: what does the Christmas service look like when a monstrous cyclone is bearing down on you, your town and your church?

I have been invited this evening to speak a little on my own experience of this Chapel as this extraordinary place celebrates its centenary. I am grateful to the Chaplain the Revd Samuel Dow for his warm invitation to be here and to several current and past members of the college who have seen their way to survive another of my sermons. I have had, it would seem, many iterations, some might say, manifestations, here in this Chapel. I had visited here, as is my wont, for the first time sometime in 1989 when visiting the University in Year 12. By 1990 I was a non-residential member of the college, attending tutorials, services and dinner for the three years I read my Arts degree. This was shortly followed by a much longer and more intense stint here, particularly in this chapel, with four years of study as a student or 'theolog' at the Theological School in the final days of then Principal, Dick McKinney.

Whilst never a resident up until then, this changed when in 1998 with my wife of three weeks, Robyn Whitaker, we moved into Trinity for our final year of study. We lived in Morehouse 1, a very illustrious address, with priests Ross Fishbourne above us, Richard Treloar across the corridor and the inimitable Michael Leighton Jones, the DOM, our other upstairs neighbour. In our new home was a hole in the ceiling from a chandelier that later priest Jan

Joustra had installed in the miniscule dining area, a warning from Ross about every word of ours being heard by him upstairs through the heating vents, a tiny garden regularly terrorized by mating possums and our very first morning as residents began at 7am when the Dean of the College phoned to demand – in no uncertain terms – why the \*&^%! had I parked my car under the College Oak on the first day of term. In my defense I had to because the college hadn't given me a swipecy to get in the rear gate.

By this point I had had 8 years association with the College and, in particular with this Chapel. One would have thought that that was enough. Apparently it wasn't. After four years of ministry as a priest in Wodonga and in Wangaratta and the nearby King Valley, Robyn and I returned to Trinity for me to serve as Chaplain to the Residential College from 2003 to 2006, with two years living in the Deanery and all four years being part of a very large number of services that make up this Chapel's extraordinary liturgical life. My stall used to be in the corner there and I would lead Evensong with the still remarkable choir, with a combination of utter joy and sheer terror.

My memories of this Chapel extend beyond however the performance anxiety that derives from a fair whack of personal and institutional perfectionism. This Chapel has been for me an extraordinary place. A place of repeated encounter with the life, ministry and sacraments of the Anglican Church. A place of worship, prayer and in particular discernment, not just my own, but that of countless students who sit where we sit and muse as we do, or should do, in the presence of God. Emotions have run high here for a century, as students, staff and alumni have come to celebrate the highs of marriage, commencement, graduation, baptism and confirmation and been crushed by the lows of mourning, tragedy and the loss of members of this collegiate community. This Chapel is thus a focus for almost every expression of the human heart, its red bricks and exquisite furnishings a rightful casing for the vast breadth of human experience. Such highs and lows are given expression through the ritual life of this place, one steeped in the discipline of prayer and the outlines of fine Anglican liturgy.

One might therefore imagine that this is not a revolutionary or transgressive place. Nothing could be further from the truth. I recall encounters that saw this Chapel – and the college – push societal boundaries that needed to be pushed. Student assault and addiction was named here; provocative student art exhibited here; indigenous art hung here that drew an outcry. All of these made us all think about what it meant for a space to be sacred, what was ‘appropriate’ for a Chapel, which, after all, proclaims the crucified God, the divine love crucified by human fear, a scandal if ever there was one. Such encounters and initiatives drew the wider college into the superb indigenous scholarship program offered, to name but one example.

Yet the faith of the Chapel is nothing if it is not communicated and lived outside these elegant doors. A large part of my ministry as a chaplain was to communicate what was proclaimed here in word and sacrament, in the wider life of the college. My own understanding of this saw myself and my then fellow Chaplain Richard Treloar at a whole range of college sports and social events, hockey, rugby and football matches, I was a regular at JCR’s, billiard room games, the SCR and Cripps Middle Common Room, Paraiso, Behan Balcony, a feature – with my three-legged Gordon Setter Emma – at the tables and chairs of the Bul and I tried, as best as I could, to drop in on as many offices and people of the college community. For several years I served as the wine buyer – with wine aficionado Campbell Bairstow – for the Founders and Benefactors Dinner, a case of putting the wolf in charge of the hen house if ever there was one. I served as the fire warden for the college during which there was the only ever recorded fire in Bishop’s, a fact that dear Frank Henegan alerted me to because I couldn’t hear the fire alarm in Morehouse. “What’s up Frank?” “Are you the fire warden?” “Yes,” I said. “There’s a fire. In Bishop’s.” And then hung up.

The Chaplains lived on campus, ate on campus, prayed on campus and we were often called in the middle night to deal with traumatic events, including hospitalisations, suicide threats, and a fair bit of simply student angst. I once had to take leave because the demands of being on call, of being open to the needs of the college community all the time, were simply too exhausting.

The witness, the faith, of this Chapel has shaped not only those who darken the doors of this church, but also those who never set foot in here. No Chapel should exist – or I would say, *can exist*, without such effective witness. The Chapel, by its mere physical presence, in the sight of most of the College and on the way to the pub, is an extraordinary witness in and of itself. This Chapel stands as a pointer to God, a signpost of faith to the Godly and Godless alike. A place for all to visit, and a visitor to all.

As an Anglican church it has always prompted the College to ask the questions and face the challenges only the church can ask. Are we remaining true to a life in the knowledge of the Risen Christ? Are we treating every person of this college as a loved member of the body of Christ, as a being of utter value, made in the image of God? Are we embodying and teaching the virtues of self-sacrifice, mercy, grace and the search for truth through education in a worldly context that screams self, self, self and has, incorrectly, linked education with only the salary that lies at its end? Jesus taught those would listen to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your soul, not for selfish gain but rather that in such devotion the kingdom of God – replete with mercy, grace and love – would be made for all people, believer and unbeliever alike. This Chapel's constant rhythm of prayer and worship is a reminder to all, in the busyness of life and work, of the prize of rest, of contemplation, of setting our minds on things above, and of God and of God's kingdom.

This Chapel has meant a great deal to me. It has been a place of discernment of learning, of grief and delight. A place of holiness, of God, of service and leadership. I know first-hand that it has been these things for an extraordinary number of people too, and I hope and pray you are amongst that happy throng.