

*A sermon preached by the Revd Dr Michael Piret, Dean of Divinity, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford, on Sunday 11 October 2009.*

During Freshers' Week, new students at Magdalen are repeatedly enjoined to master the contents of an exciting booklet called *Information and Regulations for Members of the College*. When you report at the Porters' Lodge to collect your keys, you sign off to say you agree to abide by all the provisions of that book – which is why the Senior Tutor is so keen on telling Freshers to go back and give it a good close read, just in case they missed anything during that split-second glance at its contents, in the Porters' Lodge.

When *Information and Regulations* has been read, re-read, and all its riches exhausted, new students often become desperate for something else to get their teeth into. In these cases, if nothing has yet been assigned by their tutors, I would recommend that they turn to a book which is still hot off the press and filled with even more exciting material about Magdalen – I refer to *Magdalen College: A History* – edited by Laurence Brockliss. When they have breezed their way through to page six hundred and eighty (which is about half way through chapter one), they will see that one of our most famous twentieth-century Fellows, the modern Historian A.J.P. Taylor, used to say that this Chapel – to be truly useful – ought to be converted into a swimming pool.

All of us here, I suppose, might be fairly happy that wasn't done. But Taylor's idea may nonetheless prompt us to ask what purpose this building serves, as a Chapel. For the new students here today, in particular, I'd like to say a few words in answer to that question; the rest of you can listen in. This will be more of a talk than a sermon: a talk about some of my hopes and prayers for this Chapel – a chance to say what it seems to me this place ought to be *for*; and what I hope it will mean to you, during your time at Magdalen.

First of all, I hope that for you, it becomes a place where you find uplift and transcendence. This can happen in any place of worship, of course, and I've always agreed with those who say there are certain churches which are at their best when nothing is going on, places which are at their most inspiring when they are empty, where we're spoken to only in the silence, the stillness, through the lines of architecture, the light and shadow, the ghostly presence of those who have gone before us in faith. But here at Magdalen, I think we're in a building which is at its best and most devotional when things *are* going on, in great part because of the music we have. Ultimately, that's all thanks to our Founder, who provided for a Choir in the statutes of 1480, a choir much the same in size and composition as it is today. It's my hope that you – as others have done for centuries on end – will find your hearts lifted, here, by the beauty of music, lifted beyond the difficulties, the annoyances, even the fears, of the passing moment – reminded of things that matter more. Music can *do* that for us, it can raise us above our worries, lift us out of ourselves, so we see things from a new angle. It can give us the gift of transcendence, brief though it may be: the gift of sometimes passing over, getting beyond, obstacles and limitations, beyond what was insurmountable, whether those are barriers and difficulties that the world has put before us, or just monsters that we have raised up in our own imaginations. The power of music, especially sacred music, can help us glimpse an open prospect, see a different way. We might find we can make a new plan, after despair. Or forgive an injury – where before, we wanted to hit back. Or we might simply find strength to carry on – when a moment earlier, we just felt like lying down and giving up.

That different angle, that fresh perspective, is something I pray this Chapel will give you. Whenever we are working hard and under pressure, it's easy to get everything out of proportion. It's easy to be overwhelmed by expectations and judgements surrounding our performance, even to the point of forgetting what the work was all for. So instead of our work being about a particular aspect of Biology, French, Philosophy, Chemistry – it starts to be about getting a First. We can easily forget there is a world outside Oxford. And, within it, we can start to ignore the difference between intellectual growth and academic acclaim. They are different. It's like the difference between being heroically courageous, and having the Victoria Cross, to verify it. No doubt, it would be gratifying and profoundly moving to receive the Victoria Cross; but you'd probably have gone into battle with the real aim of serving faithfully, not of getting an award for it. Academic acclaim is a wonderful thing to have, but intellectual growth has to be the real aim when you immerse yourself in study. Not least because intellectual growth is usually a close companion of personal growth, and that is something which eludes a good many instruments of measurement. I have known students over the years who have turned academic acclaim into an idol, and for some of them, getting that First has become a demon which never lets go. And *not* getting that First will chase them around as an accuser, as a reproach, for years on end. (Granted, there are a few, from time to time, who are so constitutionally lazy, that it might do them good to be chased around Addison's Walk by a demon once or twice a day. But there are fewer and fewer of those as the years go by; and more and more who are eaten up inside by anxiety about the marks they will get in Schools, by the fear of letting people down if they are not ranked higher than everyone else.) I hope that in this place, you will find the perspective which says, 'Put learning and true intellectual growth first; let the results worry about themselves.' Work hard, with all your mind, all your skill, with organisation, planning, perseverance, devotion – and it will be surprising indeed (although not the end of the world) if good results do not follow.

It may be time for a footnote. Some of those words, I should say, were not altogether original. They were only a kind of transposition of what Jesus says in the Gospels, about putting the things of God first, seeking God's righteousness, letting tomorrow worry about itself. And here we come to the heart of what this Chapel is for, and the focus of all my hopes for what it might come to mean to you. I hope it is, above all else, a place where you encounter God's truth. A place where you pray earnestly and think hard, sometimes perhaps striving and wrestling with God like Jacob – or maybe just wrestling with the *idea* of God – but a place where you, in your own way, with all the rest of us, can engage with the living Word of truth. This engagement with truth, divine truth, is why our Founder built this College. It's why the foundation stone of Magdalen was laid beneath the altar, just here, five hundred and thirty-five years ago. And this holy place still proclaims that living Word of truth to be a person, Jesus of Nazareth, whose truth not even death on a Cross could overcome. A person who loves you and cares about you, who holds the keys of death and life, a person who is the criterion, companion, and guide of every Christian. A person we meet here, again and again, Sunday after Sunday, in the words of Scripture. A person we welcome and receive under the humble forms of bread and wine, broken and blessed in his name. A person whose truth you will hear spoken by those who come to preach. And a person I am sure you will hear also in those quiet moments, when the talking and the music have stopped – in the silence of your heart – in what T.S. Eliot called the 'stillness between two waves of the sea.'

Of those who feel I have just started speaking another language, I ask for patience – because the language of faith demands patience: it does take some getting used to. To you I

would also say, that if ever you want to talk about the life of faith – no matter where you are on your journey – that’s one of the reasons I am here. If you don’t want to talk about it, but still find Chapel has something worthwhile to offer you, to help sustain you, then remember, another part of its purpose, as I see it, is just to let you be where you are, with no one pushing or chasing or pressuring you to join the Facebook Friends of Jesus if you don’t want to.

For those who are already on a voyage of faith, please come on board and join us. I pray you will find this to be a place where your faith is always growing – and where faith is not a fossil, but a living thing. We try here always to have preachers of intellectual substance, and that is for the sake of providing an element of challenge, which is a healthy antidote to oversimplification, and good for spiritual growth. But we also aim, always, to have preachers who are true to the fundamentals of orthodox belief, preachers in whom even members of the primitive Church, might have recognised a brother or sister in the faith – however strangely attired. This is meant to be a place of security; but never, I hope, of smugness or complacency. A place for the celebration of truth and the enjoyment of it; but never, I hope, of judgmentalism towards those who have come to see things differently. A place not just of reinforcement but of listening. For those of you who are believers, I hope and pray that you will also listen, here, to the challenging voice of God as you seek your vocation, working out what God is calling you to do with your life. This Chapel will then be a place from which you are sent out, to do your Creator’s work in the world, to accomplish those particular things that need to be done, which perhaps only you can do.

But for all of you – believers, unbelievers, everybody in between – for all those who are here today just because you’re curious – and for those in every category who come to feel that (for some inexpressible reason) this place is simply for you: I pray that this Chapel will be a rock and a stronghold. A place of rejoicing, celebration, thanksgiving when things are going well – and a place where you can find refuge, a stony crag, shelter from the storm in those tough times when, as the Psalmist says, the waters have come up over your head. In times like those, the very last thing you need, is a swimming pool.