

It is both an honour and a pleasure to be invited back to Magdalen. This college has a special place in my affections for through this place and the community here, my life has been considerably enriched.

Departing for a moment from the usual custom I will not disclose the text I have chosen for this evening immediately. I will reveal it later with the hope that your curiosity will keep you awake for the first few moment of my address!

The Abbé Pierre is not a name that is particularity well known in the United Kingdom. In France it is difficult to find anyone who has not heard of this charismatic individual. He was a priest of the Roman Catholic Church and was not in any way a conventional cleric.

Let me read you a couple of verses that I once wrote about him-

I see him now  
Striding forth  
Along Parisian streets  
Unmistakably a cleric.

Beret,  
White beard,  
Cassock.  
Eyes that pierced indifference  
And warmed with compassion.

No altar chained this man,  
No church controlled his life.  
He was poor  
With the poor,  
Sad with the sad,  
Hopeful with the despairing.  
He walked the Parisian Streets  
As Christ walked to Emmaus.\*

In 1945 France, in company with many other countries, was recovering from the ravages of World War Two. Thousands of people were homeless and the country faced the massive task of rebuilding itself after six years of devastation.

The Abbé Pierre was not a man to turn away from a challenge or to take refuge within the confines of a Church building. He walked the streets: met with the poor and homeless and eventually founded a community for the homeless known by virtually everyone across France, and increasingly in this country, as Emmaus.

I was once asked by a senior politician and am frequently asked, 'What does Emmaus mean?' Such is the state of Biblical knowledge today!

Emmaus of course is the village mentioned in the New Testament towards which, it is said, the risen Christ walked with his disciples 'and they knew him not'.

It was not the intention of the Abbé to provide shelter for the destitute under the pretext of converting them to religious belief.

In his wisdom he recognised what the text I have chosen for today expresses so clearly:

**1John 3 verse 18** "Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."

It was texts such as this that let the Protestant reformer Martin Luther to refer to the Epistle of James as, 'the epistle of straw'.

James, in his letter, emphasises the important of good works.

Luther, with his emphasis on justification by faith was anxious to drive home the point that salvation could not be attained by good works alone. The first requirement was faith.

Well, speaking personally I have little patience with such theological and doctrinal discussions. It is plain common sense to me that the words attributed to Christ, ‘love God and your neighbour as yourself’ mean quite clearly that one cannot but stretch out a hand to those who, for whatever reason, find themselves in distress.

University towns, and especially Oxford and Cambridge, attract high numbers of homeless people. There are several reasons for this, one of which is that rents tend to be higher where a great deal of accommodation is let out to students. Another often quoted reason is that students, even though they claim to be hard up, will frequently drop a coin into a cap placed strategically on the pavement.

Many people ask me if they ought to give in this way. Frankly, I do not have a clear answer. There are some sad individuals who, no matter how hard one tries, will not give up such a way of life. The number who leave their pitch at the end of the day and drive away

in a luxury vehicle are, indeed, few and far between but undoubtedly they exist.

A larger number, by far are those who have suffered some personal misfortune or who suffer from a personality or mental disorder. Many of those in this second category have spent a lifetime alternating between life on the streets and the comparative luxury of one of Her Majesty's secure establishments.

It is a sad fact that over 60 per cent of those who populate our prisons are suffering from personality disorders or mental illness.

Prisons are no place for such people but where else can they go?

Only last week I was speaking in a committee room of the House of Lords in support of a project designed to support those who are due for discharge. It is not at all uncommon for prisoners to have lost contact with their family to be sent back into the world wearing the very clothes they were wearing when admitted. If they went down in the Summer and are discharged in the Winter keeping warm is one of the very many problems they face. Some will receive a discharge grant of £46. Not a great deal of money if you happen to be destitute. As for benefits, most former prisoners will be eligible to receive them but it can, and frequently does, take up to six weeks for the

individual to receive payment. Lord David Ramsbotham, the former chief Inspector of Prisons, suggested to the government of the day that this grant ought to be available to the prisoner during the final week of the sentence. His suggestion fell on deaf ears and yet if it was followed up much hardship and distress would be avoided.

It is a well known fact that hanging around the gates of the prisons of our land are drug dealers and other such characters who are willing to befriend the former prisoner. I don't need to explain where that leads to.

Added to these problems is the fact that the prisons in the United Kingdom are totally unfit for purpose. When a governor is faced with cuts to his budget he has to look around at how he can make savings. He cannot compromise on security and so education classes and workshops are the first target. Very recently in one of our larger prisons I met someone who had run the carpentry workshop for some 20 years. He was now leaving and the workshop was to be closed to make savings.

The public are assured that 2000 new prison staff are to be recruited. What is omitted is that these are merely replacement staff, not new staff and before the savage cuts took place prisons were still ill equipped.

There is an even more fundamental problem to be faced and that is the whole prison system keeps prisoners in a dependent relationship. In no way does it really deal with enabling the individual to be equipped for life outside. This is not the fault of the Prison Staff, the majority of whom manage to do an excellent job despite the problems. The fault lies in the system itself and a thorough review of the whole Criminal Justice System is needed. We desperately need a contemporary John Howard or Elizabeth Fry.

One way in which a charity called 'New Leaf' is attempting to address this lamentable situation is to have an individual prisoner mentored by a volunteer in the final year of their sentence. This mentor will then meet them on release and guide them through the first steps back into a fuller life. The work done by such volunteers is but a drop in the ocean but a sip of water to a thirsty man can be life-saving

What the Abbé Pierre, in his wisdom, realised was that the homeless, no matter whether they had experienced incarceration or not, needed to have their dignity as human beings affirmed. One should never attach to the homeless negative stereotypes. They come from every grouping of society. When an individual enters an Emmaus Community( there is a

such a community here in Oxford) he or she enters a drug and alcohol free environment. They are given a room of their own with an small en suite bathroom. They are required to work according to their capacity. In interacting with the public by working in Emmaus shops, gradually they are developing interactive skills and moving from the degrading and dehumanising situation of begging on the streets.

Finally to return to my text.

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth

I fully realise that that text may be interpreted in several different ways and frankly I have used it to make a self-evident point.

I do not in any way devalue words or speech but I have little sympathy with empty rhetoric. Words must lead to action.

I don't think it unduly arrogant to say that those who would call themselves Christians are called to be co-creators with God. If that calling is to be taken seriously then we are obliged to attempt to work creatively in this world. I certainly am not full of altruism. When I do something for others,

consciously or unconsciously I am doing something for myself. It is my desire and hope that that 'something' may in fact be creative.

He was poor  
With the poor,  
Sad with the sad,  
Hopeful with the despairing.

“Let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”

\*Out of the Silence. Terry Waite. SPCK 2017