

LEAVERS' SERMON: JUNE 11th 2017

As we approach the final week of the academic year, a year which has been one of great change for me personally and a steep learning curve, I have been reflecting upon the nature of life in an Oxford College. In 1989, when I came up to Oxford as an undergraduate at St. Peter's I was told on my matriculation day, by a certain Francis Warner, an English Don there, that it was the second best day of my life. 'Second best'? We wondered? When it came to graduation day a few years later, we were, of course told, 'Welcome to the best day of your lives.'

Indeed, these ceremonies contained a kind of greatness in them: a sense of grandeur, pride of the achievement and of a journey completed. And, rightly, Francis was alluding to the college family that I had joined, and of which I would always be a member, just as those who leave this year, whether choristers, clerks, undergraduates, graduates, choristers parents and families, will always have a welcome here at Magdalen.

But I have to admit that, like many of you here I am sure, the days that are supposed to be the best are often not so. I have many happier memories of Oxford than matriculation or graduation, fine though they were, and many happy memories from my time before and after being a student here.

In fact, the happiest and most significant times in life steal upon us from nowhere and we find ourselves in a state of joy or peace or happiness, only realising the fact just as the moment slips away.

One such moment is beautifully captured in Evelyn Warre's *Brideshead revisited*, when he tells the story of Charles and Sebastian's impromptu drive into the countryside with wine and strawberries as their only provision. When Sebastian suddenly turns the car

into a dirt track, a moment, seemingly insignificant, becomes very special: Charles recalls the moment when he is older:

‘We ate the strawberries and drank the wine. As Sebastian promised, they were delicious together. The fumes of the sweet golden wine seemed to lift us a finger’s breadth above the turf and hold us suspended.

‘Just the place to bury a crock of gold.’ Sebastian said, ‘I should like to bury something precious in every place that I have been happy. So that when I am old and ugly and miserable I could come and dig it up, and remember.’

We may have experienced such moments whilst here in Oxford or elsewhere. I’m sure all of us can relate to that fleeting feeling of being lifted slightly out of the ordinary, only to find that the moment is gone. But, although our lives may be linear, and that an ending in one place only serves to bring about a new beginning in another, it is perhaps worth remembering that our experiences also combine within us so that our present selves, in the here and now, are a culmination of all that we have been, what we are, and all the potential of the future. This is captured in T.S. Eliot’s poem ‘Burnt Norton’ from the first of his Four Quartets.

“Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.

What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.”

In these long poems Eliot explores the nature of time and how all existence, past, present and future is only explicable in the eternal. Therefore, the true way of living is to recognise the present – the reality of the time we are in. The past is a living memory within us, the future is our potential. But, now is the only time that matters, for it is the only time we have.

To engage with God is to engage with timelessness, that our present experience now encapsulates everything that has gone before and everything that is to come, because God, timeless creator of time and our creator, is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.

For, if we have learned anything here in Magdalen and especially in this Chapel over the past year, it is not just for our own edification, it is for the good of those who are less fortunate than ourselves: the poor, the sick, the outcasts in society, for those who have not received an education. It is incumbent upon every one of us to take what has been given to us and use it for the good of our neighbour and to the glory of God. If we are serious about being disciples then we are to obey Christ's command to live out the Gospel, as he sent out his disciples at the end of Matthew's Gospel, but in the knowledge that, in following Christ, we have both God's authority and the help of the Holy Spirit: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me ... And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' On this Trinity Sunday it is particularly apt to remember that we are children of a heavenly Father, companions of Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

With the privilege of belonging to a community like Magdalen, and all who worship in this Chapel are included in that community, comes the responsibility to help others, to

let our light, whatever that may be, to shine out in the world, to bring all that we have to each present moment, of how we and others exist within the world and how we can help those in need, knowing that, just as the eternal Christ came before us, and lived among us, he goes ahead of us in all that we do.

All we need to do now is to bring our whole selves as we are to God with the intention of meeting the eternal God in this very moment, in this very Chapel where many have worshipped.

As T.S. Eliot puts it in the last of his Four Quartets, 'Little Gidding':

If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same: you would have to put off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.

In a world plagued by violence and division our prayers are more necessary than ever. Therefore I end with Paul's final words to the Corinthians, which encourage us, just as much as the Corinthians, to work together for peace in the power of the Holy Spirit:

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹²Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. Amen.