

## **Sermon 7/10/18 Freshers' Evensong, Magdalen College Chapel**

**Readings: Ephesians 4: 17-end and Matthew 9: 1-8**

**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

As I have already said, welcome back to Magdalen and welcome to those who are here for the first time. As I enter my third year here as Dean of Divinity, it seems that time, in Oxford, passes quickly and seems to become condensed somehow. I realised the other day, that this is the year when I will see third year undergraduates leave, the ones that started at this college with me in 2016.

But I want to begin this first sermon of the academic year by testing your knowledge, bearing in mind that everyone here is well educated. The simple question is this. Can you tell me where this literary quotation comes from? The first one to give the answer will win a prize afterwards. If you don't get it the first time, I shall give you a clue the second time. Here it is, and I quote: 'It is our choices ... that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities'. Anyone? Here it is for a second time with a clue inserted: 'It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.' Of course it is from Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets by J.K. Rowling published in 1998, p. 245. Words spoken by Professor Dumbledore.

If you did not manage to guess correctly, do not worry, for not everyone is an expert in popular culture. Next Friday I will take part in a village quiz, and my team is entirely composed of Church of England Clergy: a Canon Professor and Principal of a theological college, another College Chaplain, a Professor at Oxford who is also a clergyman, a vicar and myself. We must know something, you might think. But I tested one of them the other day. I said 'Can you tell me, for instance, who was the last person or group to win the X Factor?'. He replied: 'What's the X Factor?' Oh, dear!

But I digress. Let us examine the wisdom of another Professor, Professor Dumbledore. 'It is our choices that show what we truly are'. If this is true, it begs a question of each one of us today. What decisions have we made in our lives that have brought us, by twists and turns, to where we are right now? I don't mean simply deciding to come to Chapel this morning, although may I commend you on an excellent choice is so doing, but the hundreds of other choices that have formed us: our parents' choice of where we were brought up and where we went to school; the choice of friends we make; the subjects we chose to take and those we decided to reject; our A level choices; our decision to go into higher education and so on and so on ... And why choose Magdalen College? The wonderful grounds and buildings, the friendly reputation, the teaching, the sport or the music? Or is it more that Magdalen chose you: chose you to study here, or chose you for a certain sporting team, or chose you to sing in the choir as a student or as a boy chorister. And what does Magdalen expect in

return? What fruit are we expecting you to bear? Academic success, sporting excellence, a glittering career? Great expectations indeed. I was saying the other day that it is difficult to find the right words to describe the work/life balance needed in a place like this. One finds oneself oscillating between saying 'Don't worry, enjoy life and all that Oxford has to offer' and 'But do work hard' 'but don't worry ...' etc.

But there is a different kind of choice that puts all of this into perspective. Our readings this morning are all about new life. The healed paralytic has his life transformed by Jesus; he gets up and walks and begins a totally new life. And St. Paul gives us rules for how to live a new life - new life that we all begin again today. And the basis of the rules is this: we are member of one another. We are in this together, we are not alone, but a community and one that should be kind, tender-hearted and forgiving.

So St Paul writes to the Ephesians:

Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another ... Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

College living can sometimes be hard and people can get on your nerves, quite frankly. But as Cardinal Basil Hume once preached to his community of monks at Ampleforth 'If someone is getting on your nerves, you can be sure that you are getting on theirs'. Therefore, these rules are important. Be truthful, be honest, share with the needy, be kind, be tender, be forgiving. If we all do this, then this will be a community that is truly blessed.

I hope that you all have a great year, and whatever you have to contribute to this college, or your school or your workplace may bring fulfilment and joy. I hope that you may find the courage to love one another as Christ loved you. And I hope that whatever choices you make, be they wise ones or mistakes, that you may meditate on the life-giving truth that, before all the complex decisions of life began and before all difficult choices were presented, God Chose You. How you respond is up to you. Amen.