

Queens' College, Cambridge

Commemoration of Benefactors, 21 June 2009

Ecclesiasticus 44: 1-15

Colossians 2: 1-4, 8-10

The first lesson, 'Let us now praise famous men ...,' comes from the Wisdom literature in Holy Scripture, and this morning, *wisdom* is my theme: holy wisdom, Hagia Sofia. So here is a biological fantasia on wisdom.

Sofia, lady wisdom: present, Holy Scripture tells us, alongside the creator during creation, at the big bang. Wisdom, an emanation of the creator, the first child of creation. The stardust, if you like, out of which the universe is made. Wisdom, the ordering principle that converts the unformed to the ordered, chaos to cosmos.

Wisdom, intermediate between creator and creation, the craftsman at the creator's side, delighting in the fruits of creation and delighting in humanity. Wisdom, the *handmaid* of the creator, the womb of creation, the *nurturer* of creation.

Wisdom from the singularity perfectly expressed in Jesus the Christ (second lesson), the Christ *nurtured* in the womb of Mary. Or maybe Mary is Sofia, enabling the earthly manifestation of the eternal Son. Mary's uterus the home for the gestation of the incarnate Divine; Mary's uterus the microcosm in which that new creation grows.

From: *Hymn from the Liturgy of Basil*

From you, God was incarnate and he, who is our God before the ages, became a little child.

For he made your womb a throne and caused it to become wider than the heavens.

Mary, the mother of God, *Theotokos* in Greek

St John of Damascus: The name Θεοτοκος contains the whole history of the Divine economy in the world.

These are lovely obstetric images.

Elsewhere in Holy Scripture, Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly are two pantomime dames tempting passers by with their wares like market traders. The one leads to death, the other to life. So we need discernment, wisdom to choose. Choose wisdom personified as Jesus. Jesus' teaching, Jesus' wisdom, guiding us in life, providing the correct understanding of the world, and giving fullness of life (Proverbs 8:31,35).

We need it because of our tendency to cock-up. Our human nature like a supermarket trolley needing a guiding hand to stop it veering off to one side or the other.

Wisdom that is the essence of Godhead: the nature of God. God is love, and wisdom is love of love. Wisdom that comes more easily when nurtured in places like this. Mary is the nurturing womb for the Divine. This college as nurturing womb, enabling us to convert chaos to cosmos, to lay foundations, to be the architects of our own lives. That is what these people we remember today have helped to do, and that is what college staff do for future generations. And why? To help people find salvation: that wide place, where vision is unfettered by chains of narrow-mindedness. The Fens. The road from Sleaford to King's Lynn.

Education too often compresses us into a funnel, giving us tunnel vision, or funnel vision. But here, I hope, education is otherwise: vision becomes broadened, and we see that things could be otherwise. That's what happened to me anyway when I arrived very green from Cumberland in 1969.

Education like this does not fit well with the demands of society, where singlemindedness is rewarded. Or with academic life as I knew it where career-advancement depended on knowing more and more about less and less. This wideness of vision is an aspect of wisdom, seen in Christ. The wideness to see things as they are, not as we would wish them to be. The wideness to accept the truth of our situation, the first step on the road to healing, to salving. Salvation again.

Salvation: shalom, the wellbeing of the whole of created order. Enlightenment, in fact. Light as illumination. Light as less heavy, that is, freedom from burden. The point of the second lesson is that in Holy Scripture Jesus Christ is identified with wisdom. He leads us to salvation, enlightenment. 'And if you want to know the way, be pleased to hear what he did say.'

This College as uterus, our benefactors as placental agents. Queens', after all, shall be thy nursing mothers. We need nurturers. There is no such thing as a self-made woman or man. Behind every successful man is an astonished mother in law. And behind every successful student, maybe even a proud teacher.

We need to remember all those who have nurtured us, who have provided an intellectual and spiritual womb in which we grow. In my case, some are here this morning. Some are not. Some flit in and out of my memory, some from this College, some from other colleges, and some from that extraordinary menagerie of iridescent butterflies that was, in the early 70s, the Department of History of Art.

Yes, let us now praise men and women of vision, giving thanks for their generosity. Let's do them honour not by preserving the past as a fly trapped in amber, but by enabling the past to flower, and enabling all those who come here to flower. Drawing out the timid, sitting with the perplexed, holding up a mirror to the bumptious, feeding minds and spirits so that when the storms of life overtake them, they have the resources to dance in the rain. Giving people the tools to explore the intellectual cosmos, and giving them permission to make mistakes. They also serve who have the courage to be mistaken.

We need not worry about squeezing them into a funnel for the future: just let the future go where it will.

This is a lesson for life. We spend too much time regretting the past and worrying about the future, so that we don't get chance to look around at the present. This is not wisdom, it's neurosis, maybe even psychosis. As a medical teacher for 30 years, I learnt early on that I could never predict the impact I might have. Quite often the most profound and heartfelt thanks came years later from individuals who said nothing at the time, but who had been encouraged, stimulated, provoked by some throwaway comment. So we do well to nurture the present and leave the future to itself.

There you have it, ladies and gentlemen: a fantasia that has taken us from the stardust of chaos to the order of cosmos, from the womb of creation through the womb of Theotokos to the womb of Queens'.

Today is a day for gratitude for this place, not for what it was in the beginning, is now, or ever shall be, but for what it enabled, for what it enables, and for what it will enable. For giving us the freedom to attain some sort of wisdom on the journey to enlightenment. It takes some of us a long time to begin to see the fruits of this, but better late than never.

President and Fellows, what you do today is for the sake of those who come tomorrow. For all that, you have at least my thanks, and I suspect those of all the members here. *Floreat domus*, not for the sake of the house, but for the sake of those whose gestation it sustains, for scholars now *and* in the generations to come.

I finish this peroration by presenting you with greetings from Chesterfield. Thank you for inviting me to come, and thank you for listening, if indeed you have.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.