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“PRAISE YE THE LORD! — THE LORD’S NAME BE PRAISED”

SERMON preached by The Most Reverend and Rt. Hon. Robert Runcie, Visitor to the College, at the 150th Anniversary Service held on Tuesday 17th November 1981.

Archbishop Howley presided over an opening ceremony for the Chapel in 1831. It lasted for four hours. One hundred and fifty years later, we have at least trained Archbishops in the art of brevity.

The Chapel, like King’s itself, began its life at a time of fierce religious controversy. This college was conceived as an Anglican bastion and in the beginning Chapel services were compulsory. “Now”, commented one Church journal with satisfaction, “there will be neither motive nor excuse for any parent to inflict upon his offspring the disgrace of education in the infidel and godless college in Gower Street.” Indeed the religious tone of the early King’s was so pronounced that one noble lord described it as “an institution for training Jesuits”. He was thereupon challenged to a duel by the Duke of Wellington – the only duel the Iron Duke ever fought was for the reputation of this college.

A hundred and fifty years later, perhaps, controversy does not rage so fiercely, but there are still those who wonder whether a chapel really belongs in a place of science and learning, at the very heart of a university. I want to suggest that if we aspire at King’s to educate the whole man then we botch the job by not paying attention to the development of the human faculty for worship.

That may seem a curious way of putting it. Worship is commonly understood as a somewhat peripheral activity for those who have a taste for well-choreographed togetherness. Many would also say that this is very much a minority taste at the moment, but I want to suggest two propositions about worship which I hope will make my meaning clear. First, everyone without exception is a worshipper. Second, whatever you worship inevitably marks you.

Modern people do not differ from Jacob in the story from Genesis, read as our First Lesson, in having a faculty for worship. Men and women are natural worshippers. Everyone is engaged in worship every day because human beings have so evolved that they constantly look beyond themselves to refer what they are and what they are doing to something or someone they regard as fearsome or attractive.

Whether we are aware of it or not, we are engaged in worship every day of our lives. But of course the gods people worship vary very much indeed. The most popular gods are abstract: they are dreams like Success; Security; Power; Wealth. They are abstract, but not impotent. They exert a powerful influence on how we behave, how we choose our friends, whom we invite to dinner, how we spend our money.

Sometimes, of course, the gods are other human beings. I once taught at a school at which some of the pupils were Americans. One of the girls worshipped a Puerto Rican wrestler named Bruno, who operated in Boston. We were both being driven rather dangerously through some

country lanes and I remember her sitting on the back seat of the car shouting: “I’ll die for Bruno, but I don’t want to die for anyone else”.

So in a university the question of the search for and the discovery of a worthy object of worship should be on the agenda. I believe that this chapel keeps that question alive and also provides a place where we can experience the Christian answer, which is that we worship the Father, as we see him in Jesus Christ, “for in Him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell”. The Father is our point of reference for all that we do and for all that we are becoming.

Granted that worship is inescapable, it is clearly of very great importance for us to ask the question, “What am I worshipping? What is my dominant point of reference?” This becomes even more significant if you accept my second proposition about worship.

First, everyone is engaged in it whether they know it or not. Second, whatever you worship puts its mark on you. You cannot help giving away, often unconsciously, to others the name of the god you worship. This is because the dominant influence on your life, whatever it is, is going to leave a mark on you. This is true, not only of our behaviour, but also of our very faces. We have all registered the serene beauty of the faces of those who have devoted themselves to the worship of the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ – perhaps the face of some nun comes to mind. We have all also noticed the strained and avid faces of those who really worship money or power, whatever formal religious allegiance they may profess. The truth is that, after the age of forty, we are in large measure responsible for our faces.

I believe that in trying to understand history you neglect this truth that man is a natural worshipper at your peril. We are used to looking at history as being governed by political and military events, or by economic factors, but the operation of the innate faculty for worship also has to be taken into account. One of the great themes in the history of human societies has been the search for someone or something worthy of worship. In default of a worthy vision, the faculty for worship which is in all of us and will express itself, come what may, will attach itself to an unworthy or even a dangerous vision. Who could fail to see in the Jonestown tragedy that the faculty for worship had been tragically misdirected? Who could fail to see in our own societies that the worship of money beyond all reasonable need or sense has distorted our social relations?

If we are all engaged in worship, and if the god we worship marks us profoundly, then our search for a worthy vision to inspire our worship should be urgent and strenuous. Any society or institution which fails to take this question seriously is in deadly peril. We give thanks that this chapel has been a focus for worship in this college for one hundred and fifty years and we pray that the education offered here will always be marked by the realism that, just as man the thinker and man the athlete need education, so, if we are to avoid living at a dangerously unconscious level, man the worshipper needs education too. The Christian worship here provides one way, which I believe to be the most profound and convincing, but which should at least be definite and vivid enough to help others in their search by allowing them to grow by defining their dissent from it.

“Praise ye the Lord! – The Lord’s name be praised.”