

(soft music)

- Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight. Oh Lord our strength and our redeemer, amen. There are probably some of us in chapel this morning who still read a chapter of the Bible every day. We began to do this as youngsters and the usage has continued. If anyone asked us the reason for this daily Bible reading, we might have to admit that it's merely a matter of continuing custom. We could defend the practice by appealing to the dictum that it's never wise to give up a good habit until we have something better to put in its place. Now, in this chapter of parody routine, we regularly run across verses that baffle or intrigue or tantalize us. I came across two such verses, and I want to share with you my reflections on them. They are in Zechariah, the last chapter, the passage read as our scripture lesson. Now Old Testament scholars have divided the book of Zechariah into two parts. The first part chapters one to eight is a fairly straight forward commentary on the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, after the return from the Babylonian exile around 520 BC. But the second half, chapters nine to 14 is almost a no man's land for the lay reader of holy writ, that is no agreement among the scholars as to its date, its authorship, or the reason for its writing. Therefore there is no unanimity as to its meaning. Its date is placed anywhere from 333 BC time of Alexander the Great to 165 BC, the time of Judas Maccabaeus, or else here and there indiscriminately throughout that span of years. Worse than that, the chapters read in places like a transcript of spiritual delirium treatments. It's not an easy book to understand, even with the help of a good commentary and two verses in the last chapter, chapter 14, verses 20 and 21, the last two verses in the book are the ones which pulled me up with a jerk and led to this sermon. Here they are, "And on that day, there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, HOLY TO THE LORD. And the pots in the house of the Lord shall be as the bowls before the altar and every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the Lord of hosts so that all who sacrificed may come and take of them and boil the flesh of the sacrifice in them. And that shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day." Now, what honor are we gonna do with that? Well, let's see. First we better find what Second Zechariah is getting at, unless this is Third Zechariah, as some scholars think. Chapter 14 is an apocalyptic description of the new earth, which will be the outcome of the last days of this present age. It is a pep talk to the faithful, encouraging them in the midst of national disaster with the hope of ultimate victory. When God himself moves in to take over after our last tremendous battle, God with the assistance of the heavenly hosts will set up his kingdom in Jerusalem, which will become the international holy city. Then everything will be done in accordance with his will, no matter what is done, it will be holy because God's okay will be stamped upon it. Not to dramatize that fact the author gives the two simple surprising examples, on the bells of the horses there will be inscribed Holy to the Lord. Now, these are the words Holy to the Lord, which the Lord decreed should be inscribed on the breastplate of the high priest. Now that's quite a jump from the sacrificial vestments of the high priest to a horse's bridle. And to drive home this point of universal holiness in the redeemed Jerusalem, the prophet offers another illustration. Jerusalem will be so free from anything unclean that any pot may be taken at random and used for cooking the sacrificial flesh. There will be no need for merchants, traders to sit in the temple, to sell the pilgrims special vessels, exclusively consecrated to the service of God. Any old pot or pan will do, because everything in the kingdom of God has his

imprimatur upon him. Now, what is the universal truth behind these horses bells and those cooking utensils? Isn't it something like this? In the kingdom of God, the common everyday life will be so completely under his eye, that that will be a thorough smashing of the barrier between the sacred and the secular. This piece of equipment will not be stamped sacred. And that piece of paraphernalia will not be labeled secular. This mode of action will not be designated holy and that form of behavior will not be termed profane, but such an interpretation is a way bit too much for most religious folk to swallow. They don't deny that, all will be holy in the new Jerusalem, but they do deny that it has anything to do with horses and kitchen utensils. Only what is sacred on earth will continue to be sacred in heaven. Now that's a disturbing thought. It means, for example, in my own religious tradition, that every day will be a Scottish Sabbath with sermons and psalm singing and Sunday clothes. With no interesting reading, no games, no whistling, no laughter. It will be worse than solemn, it'll be sanctimonious. For others, life in the kingdom will be a little transcription of the revelation of Saint John the Divine. We shall spend our time casting down our golden crowns around the throne on the edge of the glassy sea. A useless occupation, devoid of both dignity and humor. "And a plague on both your houses on Scott's Presbyterianism and on literalism," says the unknown author of Second Zechariah. You misunderstand God and religion and life. All that we normally do on earth eating, sleeping, working, playing will be continued as the kind of living which God believes to be natural. That is in accordance with his good pleasure. Driving a horse will be a religious action as religious as formal worship. "As the breakdown of any barrier between the sacred and the secular, holiness is a universal," that's how Henry Jones puts it. Religious life is nothing but the secular life devoted to the best we know. Professor Waldo Beach explicated this idea a few months ago in a sermon from this pulpit, he was defining in conjunction and in contrast three words, secular, sacred, profane. Now, if I interpret him correctly, the secular is the raw material of both the sacred and the profane. The secular is a religious, non religious in that it is the day in, day out stuff of all existence in the world. The sacred is religious in that it is the secular devoted to God. The profane is anti religious in that it is the secular twisted and warped away from any divine perspective. And the closing verses of Zechariah, "Look forward to a day when there would be nothing profane and nothing secular for all life, all normal life, all everyday life would be willingly, unconsciously live to the glory of God and the wellbeing of the beloved community." "Now all this is quite interesting," you charitably remark, but what has it to do with us? Certainly what on earth has it to do with us? The end of the world has not come, God has not set up the new Jerusalem. Even if this apocalyptic prophet has predicted with accuracy the life of the kingdom, it isn't here yet. So what's the point of all this for us? What is the point? Well, hold your horses a minute. According to the Christian faith, with the life and preaching of Jesus Christ and with the establishment of the church under the guidance and control of the holy spirit, the kingdom has been inaugurated. We who claim the name of Christian are already members of the kingdom and the church is a colony of the kingdom on earth, according to Saint Paul. And we are supposed to behave so far as in as lies as if we belonged to the kingdom. The final advent of the new Jerusalem is not yet, but that is where our citizenship lies. And even here and now we must conduct ourselves to the best of God's ability in us as his folk. One way we can do this is to make sure that our daily work and conversation are ordinary going out and coming in are worthy of God's seal of approval, of the descriptive adjective holy, acceptable to him. You know what this means in our rising and eating and sleeping. We transform the secular into the sacred when God is recognized as the center of all life, we awake with God. We may say to him, "Lord, as we go to our work this day, help us to take pleasure there in." Or in the rush of our hectic academic routine we may pray, "Lord thou knowest, how busy we must be this day. If

we forget thee, do not thou forget us." That was first said before a battle in 1642, and then it meals we realize that food is not something to be considered either as fuel or as the be all and end all of existence. It is a sustaining provision for which grace is gladly spoken. Here is a chuckling grace for breakfast, unless you're on a low fat diet. One that is both unusual and completely Orthodox "Our thanks for eggs and buttered toast. Father, son, and holy ghost." (audience chuckling softly) Cooking may be a holy act and the cleaning up a prayer of thanksgiving. And when we lie down we may go to sleep under the eye of God, into thy hands oh Lord we commend ourselves this night and all who are dear to us. Or watch with those who wait or watch or weep tonight and give a dine angels charge over those who sleep. And that's our home and our college become more than a dormitory and a cafeteria with a garage or a parking lot attached. The secular stuff of life becomes holy. And think of this transformation of the secular into the sacred in the church. Church is not merely the place of the great Sunday service and then occasional celebration of the Lord's supper. It is the location where something of the quince in life is sought in baptism and the quiver of life is sought in the funeral service. It just that segment of space set aside for the sanctification of the whole of life, not a part of life, of the whole of life. And that's why in Glasgow Cathedral, for example, there is an annual service for the churching. That is, the churching of the town council after the elections. I even had a service last year for the Glasgow & District Churches Badminton Association. That's why that has been in years gone by and duke had service in the chapel during Greek week, which may have reduced the number of incidents or dirty rushing, I don't know. And do you know that some years ago at 8:30 on a Saturday morning before the Duke Navy football game, 15 Protestant members of the Navy squad received the bread and wine from the Lord's table in the Memorial Chapel? Now that was not for them, a form of big magic. If it had been, they would not have requested the Dean of the Duke Chapel to be the celebrant. These boys we're offering their athletic skills to God they had a precedent in the Juggler of Notre Dame. And I remember one year when a divinity student came to me and asked me to help him prepare an order of worship for the dedication of a furnace. My first was ejaculation was, "Glory be to God, a furnace?" (laughing softly) And he said, "Why not? We dedicate alters and Bibles, pulpits and baptist trees. My congregation has saved up for three years for a furnace. Why can't we dedicate it? It means much to them it therefore probably means much to God." I reminded him there wasn't much in the Bible about furnaces and what was there was not particularly pleasant. (laughing loudly) But he persisted and we wrote it and he used it. And he told me afterwards, "When the prayer of dedication was over, the furnace went off with a glorious bang." (audience laughing loudly) See what it did it turned the prayer into a (indistinct) this is the response. Now that furnace has inscribed upon it, even if invisibly, Holy to the Lord. We lack imagination in our use of the sanctuary, so often, too often, that's because we continue to draw a line between the sacred and the secular to markedly. We try to save holy from infection, it's a laudable motive, but sometimes we are over squeamish in a way that God isn't, thank God. But is our everyday life on earth really holy? Of course it isn't. We're not yet in the kingdom completely. We're still in the world we are of necessity to the world. And it's wise to remember how the world is defined society has organized a part from God. And yet there is a chance for witness, for holy behavior. 10 years ago, I worshiped in Glasgow university at a special service in the chapel a service for the commemoration of benefactors. And at one point in the service, the rubric reads the congregation standing, the principal shall read the role of benefactors and the call to commemoration. His first words are, "It is outbound in duty to commemorate thankfully before all mighty God, all those are benefactors by whose liberality this college and university has maintained the studies of godliness and sound learning." And beginning with the Bishop of Glasgow in 1451, he comes right down the centuries. And the most moving

thing to me at the service was he suddenly said, "And do not let us forget these benefactors," and pointed to the War Memorial to world War I on this side to world War II on this side. For arts and science, medicine, engineering, and law, as well as divinity are holy to the Lord. December 11th in this Year of Grace falls on a Sunday and December 11 is Founder's Day. Would it not be appropriate especially in the light of our motto, (speaking in foreign language) to have the university service of worship that morning be one of great and the glad thanksgiving for those dead and alive, who we established our academic heritage. If we believe that, it's time to start planning for it now. Do you know how the midwinter dance at one of the new England prep schools ends? With prayers and anthems in the chapel? How do the students and their dates react? They are embarrassed to mortification, the first time. And then in succeeding years, they actually look forward to it. Why are so many folk married in church and not by a JP or a judge? Custom? Of course. Conviction? Sure. The bride's desire or the bride's mother's desire for a show, bless their hearts. (audience laughing loudly) But not entirely. They want this new joint life to be holy to the Lord and if they remember that it can be, and the secular is given the impromptu of the holy. Think of this yourselves regarding your own life in the university at study, in the dorm, while eating, in the gymnasium, dating. Is Holy to the Lord an impossible inscription? If so, why? How do you think Jesus our Lord would react to this sermon? He was born in a stable, he grew up in an ordinary home, his contemporaries by and large missed his spiritual genius because they insisted on the line between the sacred and the secular and dismissed him with a comment, "He's a carpenter, we know his family." He found God in the commonplace, in the flowers of the field, in the howl of a sparrow, in the change of the year, in a few cents in a collection plate. And before he died he took the ordinary food of a Judean table, bread and wine and made it so holy that 20 centuries later, we keep on repeating his actions. Maybe he had read Second Zachariah and behaved as if the kingdom were here and maybe we are supposed to go and do likewise so far as we can, God helping us. What more shall I say, justice. He had again the last verses over the last chapter of Zechariah. "And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, Holy to the Lord. And every part in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the Lord of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of them and boil the flesh of the sacrifice in them." It is a consummation devoutly to be wished. Let us pray. All mighty God who created all things and saw that they were good. Teach us to call nothing which though has made common or unclean, but to use it well as the very tough about existence. So thy glory and our benefit in the spirit of thy son. And may the blessing of God come upon you abundantly, may it keep you strong and tranquil in the truth of his promises through Jesus Christ, our Lord. (singing softly)