

THE SERMON PREACHED IN
DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

by

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It is surely a mark of great grace on the part of those who planned this Festival that an Englishman should be invited to preach the sermon at its opening service. I take it as a symbolic act. America is saying to the Old country: "All is forgiven. Welcome!" I accept the invitation with warmth and gratitude, even if with trembling in the face of the opportunity given me to speak to this great congregation. From many visits to this country, and from years spent in Canada, I know something of the generosity of hospitality of the peoples of N. America, and I sense it here again today.

I want to congratulate those responsible for the conceiving and bringing to birth of this Festival--for the creative imagination which has gone into its planning, the fruits of which we shall enjoy in rich variety this week.

Even if I were an historian--which I am not--this would not be the occasion nor would a pulpit be the place for me even to sketch the story which, four centuries ago, provided the events we now commemorate. But perhaps you will allow me to share with you some thoughts which have exhilarated me and saddened me as I pondered the events themselves and the happenings which have occurred between 1584 and 1984. As a minister of the Gospel, I have tried to set these events against the background of the revelation of himself that God has given us in the Face of Jesus Christ.

All great discoveries, all ventures into the unknown, seem to be made at great cost. Man seeks to explore Everest; Man learns to fly; man ventures into space--but not without initial setbacks and even disasters. It was so with the adventurers--so many of them from the county of Devon--who sought to find out and eventually to colonise the New World. Raleigh himself must have looked back with a sense of profound disappointment at what seemed to him the failure of a vision which he shared with his Sovereign Lady, Queen Elizabeth. "The unmapped world beyond the

ocean seemed an archipelago of fairy islands. . . each waiting to be discovered by some adventurous knight vowed to leave his bones far away or to come back rich and tell his tale in the tavern". But there was many a grief and many a loss of men and ships before the vision of a new England beyond the seas gained a semblance of reality. Perhaps Raleigh, as he looked back on his intention peacefully to settle the land and bring the advantages of England to the native people, thought of the words of Jesus about a grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying before ever it could bring forth a rich harvest.

Four centuries later, and with a sense of perspective which only the passage of years can give, we look back. It is a mixed story that we see. On the one hand, there is venture enough to stir the blood of any reader. There was a good intent. According to their lights, many of the adventurers thought less of making private fortunes than of rendering service to their royal mistress and of upholding true religion against Pope and Spaniard. But all human endeavour is marked and marred by sin. Personal greed, acquisitiveness and desire for glory--these things led to inhuman treatment of natives. Again and again history has shown us glaring instances in its sometimes beneficent, often shameful, story of colonisation. Glory and shame are mingled inextricably.

But in the long run, out of the midst of the blood and the sweat and the tears, we see the emergence of certain factors which have proved of immense benefit to the world. In the seventeenth century, this newly discovered land was to prove a place of freedom for the Pilgrim Fathers and their descendants; and later, after conflicts which we would like to forget if history allowed us, we see the emergence of an alliance of two great peoples which was to ensure, through two world wars, the triumph of justice over tyranny.

Against that sketchy background, there are two matters which I want to stress.

First, the importance of maintaining and strengthening the alliance between America and Europe, and especially between America and Britain. In stressing this, I refer not merely to matters of defence, important as these are, but to cultural ties, the things of the mind and of the spirit. Down these centuries, we have learned much from one another in the spheres of science, literature, music, the arts, craftsmanship. We have much to learn today. We shall have much to learn in the coming years.

The stretch of water that separates is steadily growing narrower. The Atlantic is now little more than a pond. If you think I exaggerate, very well. But consider the journey which involved Raleigh and Drake and the others in weary weeks and dangerous months of travel and which now is accomplished, as

I know well, in luxury and comfort in little over three hours. This, you may say, constitutes a danger, for, willy nilly, America is thereby implicated in the follies created by a mounting arms race, surely the example of scientific man's lack of wisdom in spite of his ever-increasing knowledge. That is true, and it is a sobering thought. But the proximity of America to Britain and of Britain to America affords both of us vast opportunities for mutual friendship, care, and enrichment. I see this Festival as an example of what I now stress. We learn from one another, we two peoples. We share with one another.

Secondly, I wish to urge the importance of sharing our joint inheritance and our abundance with others across the world. In doing so, I think particularly of the so-called Third World, better called the Two-thirds World or, as Willy Brandt in his two Reports has taught us to think of it, the South. In addressing ourselves to this huge section of our one world, we speak from a position of privilege and wealth which may, or may not, be thereby a position of advantage. For there are alarming signs on both sides of the Atlantic, that the rich are growing richer and the poor are growing poorer. When that is so, the seeds are being sown of strife, war, and devastation. When that is so, men and women of conscience are forced to ask awkward questions: How long can a nation go on increasing its own wealth careless of the starvation and deprivation of others? What sort of nation produces a government which allows this to happen? What sort of people prefers physical ease to moral decline? How long can we go on harping on the theme of raising our "standards of living" when millions, only a few flight hours from us, starve? One world? Yes. But a world riven down the middle by the divide of famine and illiteracy on the one hand, and luxury and carelessness on the other. "We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves". The words of St. Paul are uncomfortable in their directness, but they are neglected not only at the peril of the under-privileged but also at the peril of the poor little rich men and women of the North.

I am fully aware that, in sharing our wealth (be it of material goods or of things of the mind and the spirit) we are engaging in a task of considerable delicacy. To go to the nations of the South in a spirit of superiority is to invite disaster. India and China, to take but two examples, had high civilisations before we were so much as thought of. And we shall do well to bear this in mind not least in regard to China, now that that fifth of the world's population is opening up again. That warning, however, taken with all seriousness, must not hinder us from offering all we have, while at the same time it makes us aware of how much we need the insights which these nations alone can give us. Africa has much to offer us--and Asia too, and Latin America--if we are humble enough to receive at their hands and to learn from them.

Do I need to say more about the millions of starving people, including children? Do I need to stress the pathos of illiterate multitudes who cannot read the instructions on a medicine bottle or the headings of a newspaper? Or the peril of the millions of adults as well as children who in a given year learn to read, but, because we do not provide them with the good news of life in Christ, fall victim to creeds which can only degrade? We complain if we have to wait half-an-hour for the doctor or half a week for an operation. My daughter, living in Pakistan, ministers every day to patients who have travelled on foot or on donkey for many days before they can receive her help--then it often comes too late.

But the most precious part of our joint inheritance is the Gospel of the grace of God, the lineaments of whose face were partially seen by the prophets, and the fulness of whose revelation is seen in Jesus Christ, our Lord. God forgive us: we have grown so accustomed to the greatest story in the world, so used to the ministry of word and sacrament, so deafened by custom to the message of the Bible, that we have ceased to marvel at the miracle of Bethlehem and Nazareth and Calvary and the empty tomb. And even more of us have ceased to care deeply about the spreading of the Gospel intended for the whole of mankind.

This carelessness has arisen, I believe, partly because we confuse two concepts--that of proselytism and that of evangelism. Proselytism has about it, at least in its present-day usage, a note of coercion, of pressurizing some one probably against his will to believe as you do, to convert him to your religious position so that he swallows your religious faith. In so far as that is a true definition, there must remain to that word a sinister connotation.

Evangelism, on the contrary, is essentially something positive and non-coercive. It is sharing with others something you have found almost unbelievably good. And, precisely because you love the person with whom you are in contact, you long to share that good thing - or, as the Christian would put it, that supremely good Person - and so you engage in evangelism.

Sometimes evangelism appears on the scene in distorted form. At the worst, it becomes proselytism: and at its very worst has appeared in history in the form of forced baptisms and similar horrors. But at its best, the Church has gone on its mission to "preach the Gospel, baptise, teach and make disciples," sharing a faith, hope and love which are the hall-marks of genuine Christianity, holding forth the word of life, Bible and sacraments in one hand, the instruments of compassion - medicine, literacy, education--in the other.

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The nations of our world are heaving with unrest. The map of the world will look very different at the end of this century from what it did at its beginning. It may well be that the powers of this century will give way to new forces, for it is the lot of all civilizations to crumble and fall. But the Kingdom of God remains, sure, unshakeable. And I believe that if we are humble enough and penitent enough to go to the world holding in our hand the light of the eternal Gospel, centered in Christ crucified and risen, God in his mercy may yet have a work for us to do. And perhaps, by a miracle of his great goodness, he may allow us--even us--to have a share in it. That would be to enter into our destiny--together with one another: together with God.