



12 May 2019  
The 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the  
Consecration of the College Chapel  
Evensong  
Genesis 28 vv. 10–22  
1 Peter 2 vv. 4–10

## Chapel and Community

By The Most Rev'd Dr Michael Jackson  
Archbishop of Dublin

1 Peter 2 v. 5: *You also, as living stones, must be built up into a spiritual temple, and form a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

### INTRODUCTION AND SOME HISTORY OF THE COLLEGE CHAPEL

Phrases like: ... *to the glory of God* ... and ... *in memory of* ... either trip easily off the tongue or are so clichéd that we take little notice of them. They are what we associate with what we take for granted; and then the cynic in us takes us further; and we perhaps say something like this: But is this not only another example of the living drawing attention to themselves in order to secure and to sustain the privileges they enjoyed *in heaven as it was on earth*, to adapt the prayer Our Lord taught his disciples? And our distaste joins forces with our self-righteousness – and we simply move on – vindicated! But I suggest that, in the process, we lose something faithful and fruitful and forceful in our elegant cynicism. Many such people did good and we are today's beneficiaries.

In St John's College Cambridge this type of negative approach is not so easy. In my experience, our College Chapel is loved by our members. The College Chapel itself is visible to anyone rounding the corner into St John's Street on a bicycle or walking hurriedly through the college to rooms, to a Supervision or into the Buttery for lunch or, at this time of the year, going purposefully over the bridge to claim a punt for the afternoon. The College Chapel takes up one side of The First Court. It stands out architecturally as entire of itself as, in fact, do all the various components of the built heritage of this college. We seek to offer not pastiche but ever-new engagement with the present in our day and with the resources that are to hand. In such a way, the built heritage reflects the intellectual and the social life of our organic community. The Chapel is *seen* and, if you are attentive, *heard* in the life of this college – such is the way of those who play the organ that they grab time to do so when the rest of us are about other things or even asleep and their industry and acumen make us feel horribly guilty.

### HISTORY OF THE CHAPEL

The period during which the chapel was built is the years 1866-1869. It replaced a smaller medieval structure dating from the thirteenth century. That church served the needs of a hospital. The modern colleges mark a continuity with and a radical development of a medieval and monastic style of living and learning – dynamic yet different. The chapel is the work of Sir George Gilbert Scott who had recently finished work on the chapel of Exeter College, Oxford. Both are based on Saint Chapelle in Paris. The crowning glory of St John's, in so many ways, is the distinctive and highly visible tower. This is based, in turn, on Pershore Abbey having also, one imagines, an eye towards the tower of Magdalen College Oxford. Misericords and panelling and some fifteenth century glass were incorporated from the old chapel. The nineteenth century glass is, in the majority, by the renowned Clayton and Bell. Sadly the major benefactor Henry Hoare did not live to see the chapel finished, having died in a railway accident.

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## COMMUNITY OF PRAYER

The Portrait of The Lady Margaret de Beaufort, mother of Henry vii, in the hall depicts her in prayer. It would suggest the centrality of worship to and for the life of the college founded in the name of the apostle whom Jesus loved, St John. The Gospel of John is the most self-consciously theological of the Four Gospels. It is already a radical development and application of the deposit that comes to us from The Three Synoptic Gospels. It departs radically from the biographical backstop of those three responses to the incarnate life of Jesus. It puts the contested political and religious space of Jerusalem at the heart of discourse and dissent and dialogue. It moves us very firmly into a context of intellectual as well as religious argumentation - with Gnosticism well and truly on its radar. Gnosticism offers a particular type of binary ideology - dualism - and it offers not only the self-sufficiency of the material but also, in the end, the triumph of evil over good and, ultimately, the betrayal of hope. Life in a university is the very antithesis of this. While religious belief is indeed no longer central to research, to innovation or indeed to essays or exercises for a supervision, what is held in common between the religious and the academic endeavours remains what is encapsulated in Romans 8 vv. 24–25: ... *Now to see something is no longer to hope; why hope for what is already seen? But if we hope for something we do not yet see, then we look forward to it eagerly and with patience.* Hope is in the things not seen. Imagination is at the heart of the overlap of a life of faith and a life of learning. Imagination is the fuel of adventure. Universities are places of adventure.

## COMMUNITY OF OPPORTUNITY

A college is also, and first and foremost to the vast majority of its members, a community of opportunity. The opportunity takes many forms and expressions but it is effectively the same opportunity: opportunity for enhancement, for attainment and for confidence. Enhancement comes through personal development and maturity; it calls for engagement in the life of the college in what are technically extra curricular activities as well as in academic studies while at the same time keeping an eye on the second opportunity, that is attainment. Attainment is about doing something and achieving something. It is the automatic assumption of people that somehow, by virtue of being 'at Cambridge,' this just happens. It is rarely quite so simple. There is the arduous task of closing the gap between who we were when we got here and who we need to be when we leave here. Older supports fade, newer supports kick in and some supports remain constant. Two of the people who help to make this happen are Dean and Chaplain, working to the benefit of all members, often unseen and regularly confidentially – and in association with many others outside chapel life. One of their natural habitats is the chapel. It is the place of their public performance. What happens here day by day – and not least by a spiritual discipline and obedience to the psalms of the day as these give a window into the whole of human life now as then – motivates and feeds them to reply and respond, working closely with a wide range of other skilled people, to the things that members of this community of opportunity need. Those needs are of course recognizable in the context of daily living outside of here but they are concentrated in very particular ways in this type of community. And, for this reason, they need specific rapid responses.

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## COMMUNITY OF EXCELLENCE

Excellence is without doubt the assumption of a Cambridge College and I suggest rightly. There will ever be a tussle between the use of the word excellence and the presumption of elitism. Whatever the perceptions, the burden of responsibility laid on those who gain admission is to be excellent and to give and receive of the best. This is a truly exciting world in which to live and in which to learn. In this college, such an atmosphere is infectious and groups of undergraduates carry one another forward as new friendships of equivalence of respect are formed, without ever dreaming of using such language! But these things are good and helpful. There is a correct way of being opinionated (and, of course, an improper way) but Cambridge can instil this sense of being opinionated in a way that becomes a life skill. This ethos of expectation is very much dependent on the Senior Members and The Tutorial Fellows who remain while undergraduates and graduate students leave and move on. The community of learning is based on values of trust and honour that are life giving and life honouring. It is amazing how human flourishing can take place in such a generous and ultimately unpretentious environment. This is the inheritance of learning as a giving and a receiving at the same time.

I offer you prayer, opportunity and excellence as a way of looking at St John's College through the prism of its chapel. The chapel is both of the college and of the world. Its reputation for choral and for organ music is international and its focus is local. It prays daily for the flourishing of the college, not in a partisan or precious way but in the hope and the aspiration that sound learning will ever grow and prosper here. It points us to the generosity of religion at its best in a place that has specialized expectations and preoccupations and yet seeks to fulfil the purpose and the vision of our foundress. It is open to all and gives voice to the best of human endeavour and excellence in music and in worship. Its musical tradition is unsurpassed even if there are many rivals. It prays to God for those who are here and for those who are not here.

## THE TWO SCRIPTURES

Jacob's journey from Beersheba towards Harran was no easy one. He was running from home and from the wrath of his brother Esau and from the duplicity of his mother towards his father. He found himself at a shrine where he slept for the night, improvising with a stone for a pillow. God met him in his fear and enabled him to see that the future was positive, the future was generous and the future was international: *All the families of the earth will wish to be blessed as you and your descendants are blessed.* (Genesis 28.14) While it is entirely correct to read the account as a take-over of one religious site by another religion, it teaches us something about our subject today. A place of consecration can be a place of sanctuary. A place of consecration can be a place from which to return home once you have, as they say, dealt with your demons. Jacob, in his vow says: *... so that I come back to my father's house, then the Lord shall be my God ...* (Genesis 28.21). This was the very place from which he had fled for his life. This chapel is a house of God for a house of study and upholds its life and aspiration to be a house of learning in a myriad of ways individual by individual and community by community.

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The passage from 1 Peter also can be read in a number of ways too. Rejection may well be the place where we begin, but it may not be the place where we end up. We might take a leaf out of the lapidary prose of Samuel Beckett:

Ever tried.  
Ever failed.  
No matter.  
Try again.  
Fail again.  
Fail better.

recognizing, nonetheless, that every quotation can be and often is no more than a distorted use for the purpose of our own argument. Trial and error are both part of the tapestry of excellence. The argument in the Letter of Peter takes us to the heart of why there might be, and continue to be, a college chapel in a modern college and in a secular university. It gives voice to the convictions of The Foundress through praise and thanksgiving to Almighty God; it gives focus to the faith of those who believe in God whatever their tradition through Prayer, Scripture and Sacrament; it gives acceptance to those who find themselves keen to engage with the aesthetic in a range of media, music most of all but also liturgy and craftsmanship for the sake of excellence. A good start!

#### THE SEASON OF EASTER

*The Risen Christ came and stood among his disciples and said, peace be with you. Then were they glad when they saw the Lord.* (St John 20 vv. 19–20) We stand in The Season of Easter and in the Octave of The Feast of St John before the Latin Gate. Let us on this day stand in the spirit of shared peace and shared gladness, rejoicing in this commemoration of the chapel one hundred and fifty years on.

Genesis 28 v. 16: *When Jacob woke from his sleep he said, Truly the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.*