

St Davids Day Sermon, Jesus College Oxford, 2019

Isaiah 42.1-9, I Thessalonians 2.2b-12 & 'Saint David' by David Gwenallt Jones.

Are you in favour of change?

Are you in favour of revolution?

It is a huge honour and a privilege to be invited here to contribute to the St David's Day service. Thank you *Principal* for the invitation, and Megan your Chaplain in this her last week before she herself bids farewell to the college. I bring greetings from the St Padarn's Institute, the Church in Wales' new institution (not yet three years old) for theological education and ministerial development, working in conjunction with both Cardiff University and the University of Wales. It is a particular joy to be here since I remember the college with much affection from my time here as a graduate student in the 1990s. My wife, Jill's, and my first home after we were married was 7 Thelwall House. And to be back in Oxford where I spent ten happy years as graduate student, lecturer and fellow.

Days like today, a commemoration, a focal point, give an opportunity to think about priorities. What sort of priorities do we have?

Don't know about you, but does anyone here enjoy looking at the personal ad in the newspapers? Not so common now as in pre-internet days but still. Not that I am looking of course but ... you know, its fun to read isn't it. Farmer seeks wife ... must have tractor ... Reply to box 233 ... Please send picture ... of tractor. He knew his priorities!

Priorities ... are you in favour of revolution?

Some things remain the same, and so they should, like Wales winning the rugby yet again. But a great educational institution such as this college is pulled both ways. It is a place for vibrant, confident young women and men, full of passion and ideas and hopes that *their* world will be better - that all will not remain the same. But it is also a place long memories, of deep wisdom and of enduring traditions.

Did you know that the college's original statutes banned the speaking of English in classes, hall and even the quads? Deep wisdom? Well, they did ban Welsh as well - Latin, Greek and Hebrew was apparently quite sufficient.

But are you in favour of revolution?

Our first reading from the book of Isaiah expresses the Christian hope, indeed demand, for revolution. “God says: *See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare;*” “*Here is my servant, I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.*” That cry we hear from so many parts of our country and world for justice. “*to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness*” “he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.”

This Christian call for revolution is not always welcome. Another great Elizabethan foundation alongside this college was the East India Company, which forbade on its ships and chapels the Christian canticle the Magnificat taken from Luke’s gospel, required by the book of common prayer to be said daily, because it contains lines like “God has put down the mighty from their seat ... He hath filled the hungry with good things ... And the rich he hath sent empty away.” More recently it was banned by dictators in Argentina, Guatemala and El Salvador.

But however popular demand for change and the language of condemnation has become in our public discourse, revolution itself is a dangerously broad concept. We can all think of revolutions which have ended up in disaster

So the wise question is not “are you in favour of revolution” but ‘what sort of revolution?’ We need to ask ‘*what sort of* revolution is actually going to help us? What sort of revolution was this college founded to fuel? What sort of revolution does St David inspire?

At a historical level St David was one of the leading figures in the first great evangelisation of Wales. Picking up the embers left from the Roman period, and bringing to life a deep, enduring Christian faith across his nation. Planting deep into Wales that understanding that God is close to us in the face of Jesus Christ, and that the knowledge of God’s unrelenting love brings transformation for individuals, communities and nations. This college itself was also founded with very explicit Christian vision, to train clergy for the new Church of England (including Wales), and indeed in its early years has ‘missionary fellowships’ to provide ministers in the navy and overseas.

But there is a **wider wisdom** about what sort of revolution is going to help, which may guide our own lives and that of a college.

You will see printed in the service sheet a poem about St David. You might want to look at it. [*pause*] David as God's gypsy, going to schools and colleges, to the bottom of the pit, in the steel works with his goggles and blue shirt. "He brought the Church to our homes, the holy vessels on the kitchen table". This is a vision of a very particular sort of engagement and transformation. Incarnation, being alongside, change from within and at a small scale. "And led the industrial proletariat to his unrespectable Church".

We have already noted that the prophet **Isaiah** spoke of God's revolution, but if we look again at the words of Isaiah we see the same approach. Yes God's servant will bring justice to the nations, but "He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." What sort of revolution will not raise its voice in the streets? Will nurture and breathe life into the smouldering dying wick?

Not a modern one, I can tell you that, in our world in which aggression, offence, condemnation, demands for resignation and a winner-takes-all mentality is the currency of so much public life.

St David is famous for his **last words**: "Be joyful, keep your faith and do the little things"? Sounds good - all in favour of joy - we need more of that particularly at the end of week 6. Keeping the faith - amen. And doing the little things, well it's a bit .. vague. But of course they are not David's last words. He actually said 'do the little things *that you have seen me do and heard about.*' David was a teacher. The little things he encourages us to do, are not whatever random little things that pop into your mind. He had spent his life teaching the people how to live and encouraged them to continue in this teaching. He was indeed the St David of the poem in the kitchen and the steel works, not just teaching a better way but showing it. In the same vein I rather like the words of the 19th century preacher D L Moody: "Out of 100 people, one will read the Bible, the other 99 will read the Christian."

What sort of revolution will not raise its voice in the streets? Will nurture and breathe life into the smouldering dying wick? St Davids - a revolution based in showing *alongside people* a better way.

Our reading from **Paul** this evening is the set passage in the Church in Wales for St Davids day. It is full of the same language of transformation through honest genuine person to person engagement.

Paul wrote: “The appeal we make does not spring from impure motives ... we are not trying to trick you ... not trying to please people ...we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask ... not looking for praise from people ... as a nursing mother cares for her children, ⁸ so we cared for you. ... we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well ... we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone ... you know that we dealt with each of you ... encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

This is a vision which both St David and Paul got, of course, from Jesus himself. But it’s also a vision which of transformative education, which our leading institutions, like this college, strive to maintain in the face of so much mechanisation and commodification. The direct relationship between tutor and student, the sitting and talking in a supervision face to face, the corporate life of a college which is about more than the transmission of knowledge, but the sharing and shaping of life.

So, ‘are you in favour of revolution’?

Well, I hope that those who are young, and indeed all who look out at our nations in the UK, and the wider world at the moment, would say at least, yes we need change, there is much that is not right in our world.

But the harder question is ‘what sort of revolution’ or ‘how do we successfully bring change?’. And that is why St David is worth celebrating.

A man remembered for building and transforming a nation, but he wasn’t a warrior or a king. What thrusting CEO or MP wants their epitaph to be ‘do the little things!’. But he reminds us of a truth there in Paul and Isaiah, manifest in the ministry of Jesus, and still there in the deep wisdom of this college, that real change for the good comes slowly and quietly. It comes through sharing life and even the goggles and the little blue shirt. It nurtures the smouldering wick and broken reed, like a mother nurses a child. It encourages people to do the things which they have seen the leaders do themselves. It comes through what Christian doctrine would call ‘incarnation’, words only having meaning when they become flesh; ideas when they are embodied through tutors and mentors.

St Davids Cathedral, whose treasurer was central to the founding of this college, is by any standards, ‘on the margins’ *geographically* in Britain. But when you come over the last hill and look down on it, it is like stepping from the busy streets into the quiet, stable, unchanging college quad. Both are places which have brought huge change, and yet do not shout, and so witness to a better way. A way the powerful and noisy, the cynical and short-term obsessed seek to distract us from.

May we as we celebrate St David pick up his last words and be people worthy of imitation, able to say ‘do the little things that you have seen me do’ and live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory, through Jesus Christ who did turn the world upside down, through love and sacrifice, and word made *flesh*.

Amen.

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.
² He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.
³ A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; ⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”

⁵ This is what God the LORD says— the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them
out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,
who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it:

⁶ “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,

⁷ to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

⁸ “I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another
or my praise to idols.

⁹ See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare;
before they spring into being I announce them to you.”

² We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you
know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of
strong opposition. ³ For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure
motives, nor are we trying to trick you. ⁴ On the contrary, we speak as those
approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please
people but God, who tests our hearts. ⁵ You know we never used flattery, nor did
we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. ⁶ We were not looking for
praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ
we could have asserted our authority. ⁷ Instead, we were like young
children^[a] among you.

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, ⁸ so we cared for you. Because we
loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of
God but our lives as well. ⁹ Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and
hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we
preached the gospel of God to you. ¹⁰ You are witnesses, and so is God, of how
holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. ¹¹ For you know
that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own
children, ¹² encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who
calls you into his kingdom and glory.