

LEAVERS' EVENSONG 2013, JESUS COLLEGE, OXFORD

Sunday 9th June (8th Week Trinity Term 2013)

Proverbs 8.22-35; Mark 4.26-33

In nomine...

“Unsophisticated, old-fashioned, or excessively sentimental.” Could I be talking about Oxford? Hardly – because we are all – are we not? – full of sophistication. So, could I be talking about Chapel? That doesn't fit, when we have an organ scholar like our beloved Joe with his unique trend-setting capabilities. Maybe I'm talking about Exeter then? Well, if Exonians were excessively sentimental then I rather doubt I'd be Chaplain at Jesus.

So, what am I talking about? “Unsophisticated, old-fashioned, or excessively sentimental” is a definition of “Corny”. Now obviously we don't do corny in Chapel. Did you know that the term “Corny” was coined in the 1890s, because companies that sold seeds sent catalogues to farmers, and they wanted to jolly up their listings. So they added jokes and riddles to said catalogues. Which was fine except they were all totally obvious and rather trite, apparently. Hence, rubbish jokes became known as “corn jokes” and eventually the adjective “corny” was born.

Did you know that the father of all bad jokes is “Pop Corn”?

OK, so I'll stop there. Because right now I can see you asking yourselves “what is she on?” Quite.

I want to talk about seeds. (Why couldn't the sesame seed leave the gambling casino? Because he was on a roll).

No, seriously, I want to talk about seeds. Because I want you to think about what seeds have been planted for your futures here. That goes for all of you, Leavers and Returners alike. What are the most important things you have been receiving here, and how are you going to cultivate them in your lives ahead?

Seeds are valuable. They are tiny and look inconsequential. But they can grow into beautiful flowers such as we see around our quads; or golden fields of corn; or forests. They are important in many food cycles, in the carbon cycle, in medicines, in the creation of our surroundings. They have enormous potential.

It's not too late to visit the Botanical Gardens while you still can, free of charge, with your Bod card. There are some fascinating plants there, and interesting titbits of information about the use and development of plants across the world.

Palestine in the first century AD relied on crops, harvests, growing things. No surprise that there is so much seedcorn talk in the Gospels. Hence our reading from the Gospel according to St. Mark. Nearly every word about the seeds there is different. The Greek language used by Mark shows how many ways there were to talk about growing and cultivating.

Jesus speaks of seeds as metaphors for the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is shown as something that grows, day and night, and produces harvests. It is shown as something that has the smallest beginnings – like the tiny mustard seed – and yet grows to become an enormous plant which offers shelter. Seeds are good. They are tiny, they have potential, they grow, they produce food, shelter, and so much else to support us in our lives. This, says Jesus, is what the Kingdom of God is like.

I've heard a biologist say that seeds are "survival capsules". I'd like to think that your time at Jesus teaches you not just about biology or whatever degree you might be doing, but something about life and humanity. A time of learning wisdom as well as knowledge. Hence the first reading, about Wisdom, and creation. Wisdom is all throughout creation, it is present alongside us, for us to take in, for us to receive. So what survival capsules will you take away from Jesus College to sustain you through life beyond? What seeds have been sown in you?

That may not be an easy question to answer. I realised this when I tried to answer it for myself: what seeds were sown in me when I was an undergraduate? So let *me* try and answer it for *you*. As an undergraduate - I learnt more deeply about **friendship**: I made some of my closest friends, my first year room mate was to be one of my bridesmaids a few years later. I learned more deeply about **humanity**: studying what I might myself argue is the Queen of Humanities, Classics, exploring its philosophy, its history, and in fact some early civilisations *as a whole*, inspired me in making connections with previous generations and different peoples. I learned about how much I valued my **education**, and what a privilege it is. I learned more deeply about **love**: the love of my parents, my brother, boyfriends and of course my husband-to-be. I learned about **not achieving** as well as achieving: I knew disappointment in essays and exams that didn't go as well as I hoped. I learned much more deeply about **God**: my relationship with God gradually changed during my undergraduate years from quiet faithfulness to a very surprising but wonderful call to ordination.

And since then, my time here with you lot has deepened that immensely: the seeds that were planted then are still coming to fruition. I try to **carry on learning**, and making the most of being here. Valuable friendships have been helping me continue to grow. **Depth of love** in all its forms has been nourishing me. And particularly that from God: the knowledge within me that **God truly loves me** has continued to grow and it provides a *rock* to build my life on, a *shelter* to retreat to inwardly when I am surrounded by stress, and a *source* of refreshment, sustenance, and joy.

This begins to sound like one of those thesis prefaces, full of acknowledgements, to tutors, friends, families, important influences in our lives... One of our fellows, Armand has a good line in the acknowledgements in his recent book – he writes that he has managed to complete it through a combination of the “patience of his editor”, and the “increasing impatience of his wife”. (I haven’t yet shown my husband that particular line...) But, Yes, *I do want to thank you all*, and thank God for you, and for love in all its forms, but this sermon’s not about me, it’s *for you*.

So what acknowledgements would you write at the front of your life story right now? What are the values Jesus College speaks of to you? What are the seeds that have been sown in you as a group of friends and peers? And what are the survival capsules that have been planted in each of you as individuals?

Because what you have received you too, I hope, will have chance to give. The seeds that come to fruit within you in the future far and near will in turn be seeds that you can plant in the lives of others. Even the smallest mustard-seed: the delight of a smile or passing thank-you, the quiet acknowledgement of a fault, or a gentle helping-hand – such small seeds of humanity and love can grow into an ability to value and cherish one another. And, as it were, share the love. Because if Jesus is about anything, we are – and He is – about just that.

I think the seed idea is particularly pertinent for Jesubites. After all, we have just prayed “make this College like a field that the Lord hath blessed; that whatsoever things are pure, true, lovely, and of good report, may here forever flourish and abound, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” You’ve even got it on cards to take away with you and continue to remind you.

So, be Jesus People. Share the Love. Cherish those pure, true, lovely things of good report, the seeds that have been sown in you. Flourish, and abound. Go – and grow.