

The life of a vice-Chancellor is concerned with the position of his University in the league-tables and, not a little, with its position in the local and national newspapers.

The life of a University chaplain is concerned with the eternal well-being of the members of his University.

What should the life of a University student be concerned with?

If I say I am anxious about the answer to this question, I wouldn't want to be misunderstood. I see all sorts of excellent signs which are very hopeful in the lives of students. You are deeply concerned to live a decent life, and to be able to have a good conscience about it. You are firmly convinced of great values: first and foremost, of the value of human beings; and then of the value of the community of human beings.

But I do believe that forces have been, and are being introduced into the culture of the University which do not harmonise with the ideal of a University as it has been understood, and which we ought to question before we ourselves assume them or accept them. If they are the inescapable realities we are assured they are, then perhaps there is a need for us to adopt a counter-cultural attitude to them.

We have a peculiar right to question the institution we live and work in because it was the European Catholic Church which invented the University, at the beginning of the thirteenth century; indeed, only the Catholic Church could have conceived of this idea. The Catholic Church has always believed that it's *because God is one* that the world can be understood, since it is the fruit of one Creator's work. Its guiding principle in the founding of Universities was that ***all knowledge is one***, and that all sciences are part of one study of truth; this is the meaning of the "Uni-" element of the title. The oneness of knowledge leads on to a oneness of interest, a community, between all students. That community is (to this day) the one a Chaplain is there to serve and to care for. We not only have a common interest, but we depend on one another for the ambience in which we can pursue our interest in many schools.

The fountainhead of this exceedingly noble ideal of scholarship was (once more, at its beginnings) the shared faith that the converging paths of all sciences meet and are harmonised in the mind of God, the Author of all being. In this sense the Christian faith found itself brilliantly illustrated by the forms and proceedings of the University. We could certainly say that the celebration of the Liturgy in the Christian University must have borne witness to the faith in a very cogent way, uniting those who worked in many disciplines in a liturgical symbolising of the very nature of the University itself; connections and realities which remained veiled, in purely intellectual terms, could be expressed in symbolic terms, as the University community listened together to the Word of God, knelt together before the mystery of the world's redemption, fed together on the bread of eternity. In the same way that unknowing and poorly-comprehending mortals lay their hands on the Body of Christ, the people of the University stood to receive the Word in which all is created, knelt before the real presence of the fulfilment of their scholarly lives.

Behind the experience of the University of the past was the great setting of Christendom, which, however imperfectly, allowed people to see the world as a cosmos, a single unified scheme of being with a divine beginning and a divine purpose. The effort *today* to find some replacement for this world-view, which can reunite a University and create it a community, is challenging indeed.

These ideals have been dealt tremendous and deadly blows in the centuries since the rise of nationalism and the division of the Church, the enlightenment and the exaltation of the individual to the eclipse of most expressions of community. Knowledge in this climate has

appeared to undergo a deltaic distribution, each discipline tracking off in its own way, so that politicians may proceed without historical awareness, financiers proceed without morality, educationists proceed without philosophy, theologians proceed without poetry, scientists proceed without ethics, and engineers and architects proceed without the least trace of aesthetics. It goes without saying that, if the urge to unify and relate dies out completely, *religion* will not proceed at all. I believe that this will be the death of the University, which will devolve into a collection of technical training schools and a few ivory towers which happen to share a single site within one wrought-iron fence west of Nottingham (access by Mondex-card only).

You can perhaps get a glimpse from this point of the seriousness of the Church's task in the University, the reason why a hard-pressed Bishop sees the value of putting a priest into it. I wonder if I can sell you some sense of the same urgency about *yourselves*. You are the only way many of your fellow-students can hope to learn something of Christ, and experience the Church; you are the closest contact many of them will have with the great Church of the West during the most formative years of their lives. You are not only in a privileged position: you have great responsibilities. You must find the way to be apostles.

The work of proclaiming the Gospel is not simple; it is difficult in the extreme; in order to be done properly, it doesn't just demand a fidelity to a body of stories or facts. It will only work if we hit the tone and method used by Jesus of Nazareth. When Christian Emperors imposed Baptism on Turks by the point of the sword, they did the Gospel no service whatever, because their methods did not incarnate those of the Son of God, and therefore their behaviour was damaging and negative. When the Inquisition burns heretics, when the Crusaders sack cities, when parents harshly demand religious conformity from their children, they traduce the Gospel they claim to be preaching, and negate it by their deeds.

In just the same way, we must learn Christ's way in the University. It is not politically correct! It is insistent and in a sense intrusive; Jesus was difficult for people to ignore. It was a message sufficiently penetrative of the soft parts of the status quo to provoke the Crucifixion; one does not crucify a man who has not had a great, even a threatening, effect on his world. Yet the proclamation of the Gospel comes as something uniquely friendly to humanity; part of its threat, in the eyes of authorities, was and is its extreme relevance to the needs of its hearers. Although many of us find the apostolic task dauntingly huge, we can always find consolation in the realisation that we are announcing *good news*, the most powerfully *welcome* of all news. Do not let the way of the world blind you to this, or the comfortable way of life we enjoy in the University. Vice-chancellors and wardens must, like chimney-sweepers, come to dust: every human life being lived on the face of the earth needs the Gospel of the Resurrection at last.

I believe your principle talent, as students in our University, in the task of proclaiming the Gospel to the University, is your talent for friendship. *See how these Christians love one another!* There is a gracefulness about Christianity that is unmistakable: humble, but firm as a rock: selflessly generous, to the point of sacrifice: sensitive, and compassionate without sentimentality; realistic, truthful, but at the same time visionary and idealistic. Christians have to be tirelessly optimistic if they are to reflect Jesus. And all of these things are perfectly expressed in a genuine friendship.

Friendship, however, isn't enough by itself. We can be friends without being effective evangelists, and that is because we have left our faith disengaged, like an idling motor that has not been put in gear. It makes smoke and a little annoying noise, but there's no sign of progress. It isn't required of real evangelists that they spend their time expounding theological texts. But your faith has to be appropriately thought-out, and ready to be expressed at the proper time. You know that you owe it to yourself to think out your faith, to have a rational idea of God and why you believe in him. You should have a clear notion of

the Church as the People of God, and of the work of redemption as it unfolds down the centuries in the lives of believers. This ought to be available to others, and able to be defended and explained convincingly if they want to know its credentials.

The world pretends indifference to this area of life; it is called private, personal, and so on - as if the private and personal part of other people weren't the most interesting area to be in, the place we all long to enter! What else, after all, is love, except the experience, the immense privilege, of entering the space inside another person's heart? We have to find the right way of welcoming others into this space, and of being welcomed by them; we have great gifts to share, if we and they knew it.

I would like you to think about the way you believe in God. Acknowledging the part your parents and upbringing may have had, understanding the influence of the school or the parish or whatever you have received from others, you can seek out your independent, personal act of faith, your individual experience of God, your attitude to the Church, the Scriptures, the traditions handed down from the past, and so forth. Just as - especially at University - most people find themselves working out their attitude to their families and their upbringing, you have to work out your attitude to your faith, and there is no better place to do it than the University.

I am very pleased that the communities around the Chaplaincy and Cathsoc are so good, and that they are attractive to people who are willing and able to enjoy themselves and to look after each other with genuine care. But it isn't enough; even the pagans (not always, but sometimes) do as much. There has to be a sense, in every one of our lives, in which we are going beyond what is normal and natural, to create a community which bears the true marks of Christ. I want you this morning to examine the place you have in this community of ours, and to compare it with the community of Jesus in the Gospels.

There are some passages from the Gospels that may be helpful, and some questions you might like to ask yourself. In a while we can come together and compare notes.