

## University of Glasgow Choral Mass Sunday February 20 2011

“Make no mistake about it; if any one of you thinks of himself as wise in the ordinary sense of the word, then he must learn to be a fool before he really can be wise. Why? Because the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God”.

These are the challenging words of St Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians – and a preacher who finds them set in the lectionary for this Sunday when he is addressing a university congregation is truly challenged!

Will he dare to repeat them to his audience and comment on them?

Still, it is often said that wisdom consists in knowing the limits of our knowledge and in listening thoughtfully to what others have to say. One of the benefits of a university education is indeed in that exchange of ideas and challenging of one another’s logic seeking from the teaching of professors, and drawing on the wisdom of authors with a view to obtaining an understanding, tempered by such experiences.

The words of Paul are set in the broad context of his Epistle to the Church at Corinth; he may still be smarting from the poor reception he received from a sophisticated crowd of Athenians on the Areopagus where he had tried to use reason alone in presenting his message of the Risen Christ. On the road to Corinth he had time to reflect and conclude that it was to the cross of Christ that he should have pointed – for there love was triumphant, triumphing over man’s inhumanity: “Greater love than this no man hath than to lay down his life for his friends ...”. He should have addressed the heart of his hearers.

The wisdom of the heart is paradoxically in its weakness; and it was that sense of his weakness, his inadequacy to rule his people that led Solomon to pray for the gift of wisdom. It showed that he was already wise.

Many centuries later a hellenised Jew in Alexandria, that great city of culture, also sought the same gift: “For she (wisdom) is an inexhaustible treasure to men and those who acquire it win God’s friendship, commended as they are to him by the benefits of her teaching. We are indeed in His hand, ourselves and our words, with all our understanding too, and technical knowledge.” (cf Wisdom, 7)

Wisdom is a gift which comes from above. It is the humble man who receives it. But if wisdom can be described as belonging to those who acknowledge that they know but in part, it can also be defined as the desire, or the ability to “see life whole.”

Pope St Gregory the Great, the very one who sent Augustine to England in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, bemoans in one of his homilies his loss of the peace and order he once knew in his monastic community: “At one time I am forced to take part in certain civil affairs, next I must worry over the incursions of barbarians and fear the wolves who menace the flock ... my mind is sundered and torn to pieces by the many and serious things I have to think about ...”

There will be few who do not know or sense something of what St Gregory is saying, though few with his actual experience. But for all of us these words of his can be a comfort and inspiration: “And yet the creator and redeemer of mankind can give me, unworthy though I be, the grace to see life whole, and power to speak effectively of it.” (Gregory the Great, Homily on Ezechiel).

“To see life whole” – surely that is wisdom.

It is at this juncture that such thoughts become, I hope, relevant to today’s congregation. For it is the task of the university “to see life whole” equipping its students to do likewise.

“A University by its very name professes to teach universal knowledge” remarked Blessed John Henry Newman in his essay on “The Idea of a University”. He continues: “Certainly the very name of University is inconsistent with restrictions of any kind” and he quotes Johnson’s definition of a university as “a school where all arts and faculties are taught”.

Newman may have had an axe to grind, for he remarked rather caustically: “If in a certain University, so called, the subject of Religion is excluded, one of two conclusions is inevitable – either, on the one hand, that the province of Religion is very barren of real knowledge, or, on the other hand, that in such University one special and important branch of knowledge is omitted.”

My purpose today is not to draw attention to any omission in the faculties or schools of this university, but rather on the contrary to pay tribute to its faithful adherence for many centuries to a great tradition of learning and teaching across a wide spectrum of subjects – and in this being true to its founding document, the Bull of Pope Nicholas V in 1451. The original Bull was taken to Paris in 1560 by my medieval predecessor, the last of those in communion with the Holy See until 1878, and was lost certainly by the time of the French Revolution, though happily the mace of the university was returned by its chancellor in 1590.

Fortunately we have a copy of the Bull. Nicholas saw the University as “providing the assiduous student with the pearl of knowledge”

He wrote: “Amongst other blessings which mortal man is able in this transient life by the gift of God to obtain, it is to be reckoned not among the least, that by assiduous study he may win the pearl of knowledge.”

The document states that it is the Pope’s fervent desire: “that the said city – Glasgow - may be adorned with the gifts of the sciences, so that she may produce men distinguished for ripeness of judgement, crowned with the ornaments of virtue and erudite with the dignities of the various faculties and that there may be an overflowing fountain of the sciences, out of whose fullness all that desire to be imbued with the lessons of knowledge may drink.”

Today therefore, as you gather in this lovely Memorial Chapel for this Choral Mass you do so as inheritors of a legacy of wisdom that goes back well beyond the foundation of this university. Your task as teachers and scholars is to push forward the barriers of knowledge without losing sight of the context in which you work as inheritors of a proud Christian and academic tradition.

You do so, however, in challenging times. The University is not immune to the winds of change which are whistling through the corridors of academia all over the country. I am conscious of widespread anxieties, among many members of staff and students that change may lead to a loss of appreciation for those areas of study which are not economically attractive. It may be permitted to me, on account of ancient ties and an enduring sense of “pietas” towards the University of Glasgow, to voice my concern and that of many lest something of the “studium universale” character of the University be lost.

We have already seen how Cardinal Newman in his essay, “The Idea of a University” stressed the University’s embracing of all branches of knowledge, however this concern was linked with another, namely the temptation to give priority to those subjects or research opportunities that would be remunerative for the University as an institution. He voiced concern [a concern which many will share today] lest “education should be confined to some particular and narrow end, and should issue in some definite work, which can be weighed and measured.”

He refers to some who “argue as if everything as well as every person, had its price; and that where there has been a great outlay, they have a right to expect a return in kind. This they call making Education and Instruction ‘useful’, and ‘Utility’ becomes their watchword.” (Discourse 7, *ibid*).

Society has to be on guard lest in our very commercially minded and market-conscious society this view should prevail. We need to remind ourselves and others that a University exists above all so that young men and women may learn wisdom.

Newman is bold in asserting: “When the Church founds a University, she is not cherishing talent, genius, or knowledge, for their own sake, but for the sake of her children, with a view to their spiritual welfare and their religious influence and usefulness, with the object of training them to fill their respective posts in life better, and of making them more intelligent, capable, active members of society”.

To paraphrase greater words still: the University was made for students, not the students for the University. Teachers are the servants of the students and not masters of research, though research clearly has its place in furthering knowledge and engaging the talents of those who are capable, and who within the university have opportunity, for serving the common good.

Allow me to conclude with words of Pope Benedict XVI, himself a man of the university par excellence, who summed up rather beautifully this vision in a discourse last year to University students and staff.

He said: “Dear friends, a Christian professor, or a young Christian student, carries within him a passionate love for this Wisdom! He reads everything in her light; he finds Wisdom's imprints in the elementary particles and in the verses of poets; in juridical codes and in the events of history; in works of art and in mathematic formulas. Without Wisdom not anything was made and therefore in every created reality one can see Wisdom reflected ...

“Everything understood by human intelligence can be grasped because in some sense and to a certain extent it participates in creative Wisdom. Herein lies, in the last analysis, the very potential of study, of research, of scientific dialogue in every field of knowledge.”

The motto of this University encapsulates the notion of university life being a journey which takes each professor and student through truth to life, and for the Christian student it presents Christ as Himself incarnate truth and the very way to life.