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# Where Are You Staying?

John 1:35-39a

A Baccalaureate Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 13-14, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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Esteemed members of the graduating class, I want to recognize before you that today is one of the most terrifying days of your life. An elite research university like Duke is a place of immense power in our society. That's because it marks the intersection of knowledge, wealth, and social influence. None of these forces are decisively powerful on their own, but when you put all three together they're dynamite.

A degree from Duke is coveted because it bestows the power that comes from the intersection of knowledge, wealth, and social influence. But you've grown up in a generation that's been taught to be very suspicious of power. For every good example of how to exercise power, it seems you've been shown a thousand examples of how power can turn into oppression, exploitation, arrogance, entitlement, and discrimination. It would seem that all power really does is to give us each a chance to display the worst in ourselves and inflict it on others.

And today's terrifying because it feels like you're about to be held publicly to account for the power all this pomp and ceremony proclaims you've now got. Four years ago you sat here for Convocation and felt like everyone else was dead clever and you were the one they let in by mistake. Now, four years later, here you are, feeling everyone else knows exactly what they're going to do with the power of this degree, and you're the only one who, deep down, hasn't got a clue.

A university offers countless opportunities for accumulating knowledge and experience. A glance through the class list for a semester is a dizzying spectacle, the expertise of the faculty and the breadth of the libraries is intimidating and inspiring in equal measure, the range of co-curricular adventures and possibilities is almost limitless. But today is a terrifying day because it's a day of reckoning: what matters today is not, "Have you accumulated boundless quantities of knowledge and experience?" but the deeper question, "How much if any of this knowledge and experience have you turned into wisdom?" Sometimes the challenge of wisdom is paralyzing. Often we flee from it and revert to the avoidance tactic of accumulating yet more knowledge and experience instead. We call it, being busy. Is that you? Sometimes the most urgent, most driven, life is the life spent avoiding the truth.

A couple of years ago I had breakfast with Jean Vanier, the French Canadian founder of the L'Arche movement. L'Arche is an international network of communities made up of people with disabilities and those who come to share life with them. Jean Vanier has spent the last 40 years living in such communities. I asked him, "What's the hardest part?" I was expecting he'd say "Sometimes I get fed up of being with developmentally disabled people and I just long for a normal life," or something like that. But what he said was this. "Sam, if you really want to know, the hardest part is when young people come from college and they stay with us for a summer, or maybe for a year. And they say 'This has been the most amazing experience of my life – I've learnt to see the world so differently and value things so truly and ponder things so deeply.' And they have this word they like to use... 'transformative,' that's it. They say it's been transformative. And then they leave. And I think, 'If it's all been so fantastic and transformative, *why are you leaving?*'" And I said to this great man, maybe the greatest man I've ever met, "Ah, but don't you see, if life is fundamentally the accumulation of experiences, you have to leave, otherwise you'd have to rethink your whole life." "Oh," he said. "So people leave, because they're frightened of who they're becoming if they stay."

And when we'd finished, I had a shiver down my spine, because I recalled another conversation, now 14 years ago. I'd moved to be the pastor of a small church in one of the most challenging housing projects in the south of England. The head of a local non-profit was one of the chief movers and shakers in the town, and she invited me to lunch. I was keen to show her I knew all the jargon of social regeneration, so every time she used

a phrase like “capacity building” I made sure I replied with a term like “community stakeholders.” Every time she referred to “social exclusion” I countered with “leveraging private sector buy-in.” I thought I was holding my own pretty well until we reached the end of the meal. Then she looked up at me, over her napkin, and held my gaze, and said, “Are you staying?” I tried to look puzzled, and check what she meant. I said, “Do you mean, here, in this town, or at this church – or how exactly d’you mean?” But it was useless. I was just playing for time. It was so obvious and uncomfortable that she didn’t bother answering my questions of clarification. The truth was, I knew straightaway what she meant. She meant, “Can I rely on you? Are you serious about this? I’ve given my life to this work – is that what you’re going to do? Or are you one of those people who waltzes in for a while, talks a good game, and then heads off in search of another transformative experience elsewhere? Are you truly going to allow this place to change you?” I winced. I wriggled. I felt sick. I avoided her gaze. I played for time, and said, “Who knows?” Don’t get me wrong – I cared deeply about that place. I worked hard there. In the end I stayed six years. But in answer to her real question, I knew the answer was no. And so did she. And all those years later, when Jean Vanier talked about people who love and rhapsodize but don’t stay, I knew who he was talking about. He was talking about me.

In the first chapter of John’s gospel there’s a huge build up before the central character, Jesus, makes his first appearance. There’s all sorts of people around, and we get a strong sensation they’re all looking intently for something, maybe for someone. And then, lo and behold: there is Jesus. Now, whatever your religious background, if you had the chance to meet Jesus, and you could ask him any question in the world, I wonder what that question would be. The first people who meet Jesus in the gospel of John ask him a very simple, but memorable question. “Where are you staying?” At first hearing it sounds such a mundane, almost trivial question. If there’s one thing we don’t imagine about conversing with the founder and focus of a major world religion, it’s the need to search around for small talk. Who cares about house prices in Galilee, and whether it’s cheaper to rent than to buy? But hear those words again. “Where are you staying?” In other words, where is your dwelling place? Where do you abide? Where do you belong? What are you really committed to? What are you really made of? All the questions we’re most frightened of being asked of ourselves.

Put like that, you can quickly see the Bible is an extended series of answers to that question. For Jews, the tradition of the ark of the covenant, the law bundled up and carried around and finally set at rest in the temple in Jerusalem, was the answer to that question. God had made his home with Israel. Muslims see the Koran the same way. For a Muslim, the Koran is God’s guarantee of his presence among us. That’s how Christians feel about Jesus. When they see Jesus going to the cross, they realize God’s answer to the question, “Where are you staying?” is, “I’ve made my dwelling-place with you, come hell or high water. I’m staying.” So that question’s settled. God isn’t like the intern that spends a transformative summer with L’Arche, or like the young pastor who cuts his teeth in a rough part of town before moving on. God doesn’t move on. God stays. God’s staying with us, for keeps.

So that puts the question back on us. Again, it makes today a terrifying day, because we’ve accumulated all this knowledge and experience at Duke, and we’re glad to be applauded for it; but the real question is, *What are we going to do with it?* In the end, life isn’t about potential – it’s about realization. It’s not about accumulating power and choice: it’s about what you do with your power, and how you live with the choices you’ve made. One day you’ll have to stop thinking about who you’re going to be and face up to who you are.

In 1898 a young man named Albert Schweitzer completed his undergraduate education at Kaiser William University in Strasburg, which was at that time part of the German Empire. Over the next ten years he did a series of extraordinary things. He became a world-class organist. He published a book that transformed the historical study of Christianity, and is widely cited to this day. And he qualified as a medical doctor. This was a man who, it seemed, could do anything. But how was he going to turn all this talent and potential into a real life? How was he going to turn knowledge and experience into wisdom? Where, in other words, was he staying?

The answer was a little West African hospital on the Ogooué River at Lambaréné in Gabon. There, from 1913, he treated countless thousands of local patients, with conditions ranging from dysentery to sleeping sickness to leprosy to malaria to sandfly fever. He saw his work as an act of penance for the sins of European colonizers. While some critics felt he, and his methods, perpetuated some paternalistic qualities, few could doubt the courage and devotion he brought to his work. And some atonement it was. He spent the majority of the 52 years from 1913 to his death in 1965 caring for and seeking to cure all who came to his hospital at Lambaréné. The irony was that he was probably a better theologian and musician than he was a doctor. But being a physician was where he “stayed.” He turned his potential into actuality, he turned his knowledge and experience into wisdom, he let his life go beyond transformative moments into lasting commitment to repair historic wrongs – he allowed Lambaréné to change him.

When he was asked about what he had learned, Schweitzer said, “Everyone can have their own Lambaréné.” Everyone has their own take on the historic wrongs of the world. Lambaréné was Albert Schweitzer’s way of doing something about them. When we ask God, “Where are you staying?”, God’s answer is, “I’m staying with you.” When God asks *us*, on a day like today, “Where are *you* staying?”, what’s our answer? Albert Schweitzer said, everyone can turn their own experience of the wrongs of the world into a lifetime spent repairing them.

Anyone can accumulate knowledge and experience. The point is to turn it into wisdom. That’s what really counts. Is that what you’re going to do? Everyone can have their own Lambaréné. The question today is, “Where’s yours? Where are *you* staying?”