
Doing the Word

James 1.17-27

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 30, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

A university has two core purposes: education and research. You have to prove yourself in research before you are trusted with the business of higher education. That's the way a modern university works. Of the 13,000 students at Duke, around 2000 are members of the Graduate School – that is, pursuing full-time research. Of the nearly 3000 faculty, nearly 2000 are tenured or tenure-track professors, who, in addition to being teachers, are also committed to a life of research. So we have among us at Duke around 4000 people for whom research is the current or constant focus of their life's work. These people are the most prestigious people here, because in an institution that prizes knowledge they know the most. But they're also the most isolated, because once they explain the precise nature of their field of study almost no one has the courage to hold a conversation with them. Almost all of them could make a lot more money doing something else. So research clearly has a hold on their heart and their sense of calling. And for all this yet we don't spend a lot of time talking about why so many people at a place like Duke are doing so much research.

I grew up in a pragmatic culture. The assumption was, time was short, the problems of the world were many, those problems probably outnumbered the world's glories, Jesus had come to set things straight, regrettably he was rudely interrupted before he'd quite finished, and our role was to get as much of the job done before the buzzer went off. In such a world research was the equivalent of stopping the car beside the highway to look at the road map. It was only of value to the extent that it helped you get more efficiently to where you already knew you were going. Finding a cure for cancer or working out the speed of climate change was obviously worthwhile, because it improved work already in hand. But uncovering previously unheralded minority women poets from an earlier century or discovering migration patterns in sub-Saharan birds were dismissed not so much as uninteresting as a waste of precious time and a failure to put the world to rights.

I haven't entirely lost the pragmatism of my upbringing, but I've come to question some of its theological assumptions. What if time is not in short supply? What if Jesus really did save the world in the way it really needed saving, that is, by reconciling us to God and giving us every opportunity we could desire to be reconciled to one another? What if, therefore, our role isn't to save the world but to enjoy and share in the way God has already and continues to save the world? That turns us from frustrated and exasperated staff, who are constantly complaining that head office hasn't given us the tools or the time to finish the job, to adoring worshipers, who marvel at the wondrous and dazzling and hidden ways of God. And that change of attitude opens our hearts in a new way to research.

Because from such a perspective research becomes a form of love. Instant love is largely about projection, about assuming the object of your love can be a ready vehicle for your imagination and desire. But sustained love is a true appreciation for the detail and complexity and difference and mystery of the other, in which to know more is to wonder more, certainly at times to be baffled and confused and bewildered and impatient, but over time to find in close observation and relentless analysis an absorbed appreciation that goes beyond respect into love. When you look down a microscope day after day to see how your samples are doing, rigorously recording every minute alteration, when you pore over an ancient manuscript and try to establish if a later hand had added a gloss or altered a vowel, when you interview a hundred people in a West African village to gauge their notion of the spirit that they receive in their water ceremony, you are immersing yourself in the wonder of the world God has made. And the word we use for immersing oneself in wonder is worship.

Research is a form of worship the moment it recognizes that God is revealed as much in the precise minutiae of nature and culture as in the broad horizon of history or the dazzling spectacle of glorious sunset. Extensive research teaches us knowledge and mercy, discipline and patience, understanding and compassion, respect for our fellow persons and wonder at our creator. Above and beyond all this, and most of all, if we only let it, research gives us an insight into the way God loves us. He regards us not just with an instant love. He makes us not just the object of his projections and the vehicle for his pre-existing desires. He loves us as we really are, and longs to know us in our infinite, intricate and intractable complexity. Sure he gets exasperated and

mystified by us, but all the more he pores over us and studies us and adores us in our fearful and wondrous uniqueness and terrible rebelliousness. Research gives us an insight into the depth and detail of God's passion for each one of us.

I want to step aside for a moment and look at the dynamic of how scholarly research actually works. I'm going to take the field I know best, which is theology, and look briefly at one of the most familiar questions in the field: "If God is good, how can there be so much suffering in the world?" What would it mean to do research into such a question?

Well, if you were starting from a position that had a high regard for scripture as definitive revelation, you'd look at the varieties of ways the question is handled in the Old and New Testament, and find that the question is seldom asked in quite that way in the Bible. You'd look at the social contexts in which the question has arisen, and perhaps explore whether it is most likely to arise among the wealthy or the poor, among stable societies or people on the move or at war. You'd look at the way the question has arisen and been addressed across the different Christian traditions, and within other faiths. You might look into philosophical questions of the origin and development of the notion of goodness, and the difference between suffering and evil. You might look into social science data of objective and subjective estimates of suffering, and psychological estimates of the balance of physical and mental distress. You might even look at data on whether prayer affects or reduces the symptoms or degree of suffering, and whether people of faith report being more or less troubled by pain and distress than other people, and how many people who give up studying because they're so concerned to make the world a better place actually succeed in making the world a better place. Before you know it, you'll be dreaming of some kind of multi-disciplinary institute with post-doctoral fellowships and annual endowed lectures and scholars in residence and a new academic journal and the whole infrastructure of research life.

At the very least, you'd certainly do some kind of historical survey of when these questions have seemed most acute. And I imagine you'd end up somewhere around the late seventeenth century: because it was around that time, with the birth of modern science and the notion that there could be forms of knowledge that could contradict the world described in scripture, that people started to think of God as fundamentally aloof and far away, and began to lose the assumption that God is more deeply and intimately wrapped up in every event and detail of our lives than we are. Somehow we forgot that the first thing we know about God is that in Jesus he shared every dimension of our human life and voluntarily took on a degree of suffering few can fully comprehend; instead we assumed God was sitting behind some control screen arbitrarily dishing out joy and despair in random or vindictive quantities.

So that's what a theological dissertation on the good God in a world of suffering might look like. Like every student, after a few weeks of research you'd realize you could be writing 25 dissertations, because the question is always so much more complex than it first appeared.

But at this point we discover there may be a problem. We have created a huge industry that turns out dissertations and monographs – an industry whose machines are libraries, computer search tools, research grants, graduate seminars, sabbaticals, preliminary exams, preceptorial internships and on and on. This machinery is in part designed to separate the researcher from the distraction of having to earn a living while engaging in their studies – but also to create a safe zone of disciplined objectivity free from the political, religious, economic, ideological or social pressures that might seek to predetermine the outcomes of their disinterested research. And yet in creating this safe zone we are in danger of underwriting the idea that knowledge can be separated from its cultural sources and from its social consequences. The question of suffering, for example, can never be simply an academic question. It's either part of an attempt to respond with compassion to those who suffer, or it's an elaborate attempt to ignore them. The very idea that there could be an answer to the problem of suffering can quickly become a legitimation for doing nothing to help your neighbor in Durham with his emphysema or your neighbor in Dar-es-Salaam with her clean water supply.

I have a cartoon that I've kept close to me for many years. It depicts a harborside scene, and a cluster of wise, bearded and balding figures in front of a hotel, above which is a sign that says "Psychiatrists' Convention." Out in the bay there is a figure floundering in the deep water, bellowing loud but incoherent sounds while arms and

legs struggle in the waves. The caption, recording the words of the senior psychiatrist, says, “So we’re agreed then, it’s probably a cry for help.”

There’s something painfully true about this cartoon. It’s not that research retrieves information that is intuitively obvious – that’s by no means always the case, as countless scientific discoveries and revisionist historical readings show. It’s that research is all about leading horses to water, and there can be something wrapped up in the disciplines of objectivity and peer review and tentative conclusions and meticulous referencing that somehow disables the activity of research from the complementary task of getting horses to drink. The reason why the cartoon is painful as well as funny is that we assume the psychiatrists all went off for lunch and said to one another how wise they’d been – and meanwhile no one did anything about the person drowning in the bay. And those of us who’ve sat in graduate seminars wriggle uncomfortably and think, “I’ve a feeling I know what it’s like to be one of those psychiatrists.”

And at this point we hear like a thunderbolt today’s words from the letter of James. “Be *doers* of the word, and not merely *hearers* who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not *hearers who forget* but *doers who act*—they will be blessed in their doing.”

So how are we to steer a path between the unreflective pragmatism of the culture in which I grew up and the industry of socially disembodied research that threatens to overwhelm the life of the graduate student or tenure-track professor? The simple answer is only by being part of a community in which their regular rhythm of life is shaped by ordinary acts of humble service and conscious personal and corporate awareness of the greater context in which all our strivings take their place. I mean church. If your primary identity is to be a researcher, you’re likely to be so overwhelmed by the anxiety of fulfilling your professional standards that it may be hard to imagine how to reconcile those responsibilities with the simple habits of prayer and regular encounter with those with whom Jesus spent most of his time. But if your primary identity is in the rhythm of sacrament and service, the daily walk of discipleship and the discovery of friendships only the gospel makes possible, then research can be set free to be a form of worship, a labor of love, and a deeper discovery of the wonder of what God has made.

For in the end the research that ultimately matters isn’t the groundbreaking cancer breakthrough or the astonishing sighting of a new galaxy just to the left of the edge of the universe. The research that ultimately matters is the 33 years Jesus spent patiently listening and learning what it could possibly take to redeem *you*. That was truly the most painstaking research of all time. And so whether our research becomes worship or an elaborate way of avoiding the truth finally depends on one question: Do you accept his findings?