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# The Heart of the University and the Heart of God

John 13.1-15

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 25 2005 by The Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

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## The Purpose of the Chapel and the Dean

I'm deeply honored to be installed to be your Dean. This is a very happy day for me. I want now to explore with you what I'm here for.

The Chapel and the Dean are here to serve this University. And the way to serve this university is *to keep the heart of the university listening to the heart of God.*

What does it mean to talk of the heart of God? The heart of God is *on fire with love for us*. There is no part of God that does not love us: and the way God loves us is Jesus. At Christmas the heart of God comes among us in Jesus because God longs to be our companion. On Good Friday the crucifying tension between God's anger against sin and yet his limitless love for his creation means the heart of God breaks for us, breaks on the cross. On Easter morning in Jesus' resurrection the heart of God overcomes evil and death and sets us free to live close to him, close to his heart forever. At Pentecost the heart of God empowers us by his Holy Spirit to bring his life to the world. That is what I mean by the heart of God.

And what do I mean by the heart of this university? Well I am disputing the notion that this university doesn't have a heart, that the university is just a kind of transit camp that young people pass through as they journey from Yankee bravado to Southern civility or vice versa. The university is not just a soulless shopping mall, a space that simply facilitates the acquiring of qualifications and the development of specialized knowledge. I use the phrase 'the heart of the university' because the university is a *moral project*, an ongoing conversation that displays and compares and tests and evaluates, that cherishes the wisdom of tradition and explores the possibilities of discovery, that uncovers the neglected to find the beautiful, scrutinizes the new to find the good, and examines the old to find the true. The university does these things because these things are worth doing – worth doing for their own sake. They constitute the heart of a culture, and the heart of a culture is served by the heart of a university.

And the role of this Chapel and this Dean is to keep that heart, the heart of the university, listening to the heart of God. Listening. Not 'embodying', for that would suggest a power I don't have, the power of determining people's response to the heart of God. At various times in the Church's history its leaders have thought they did or should have that power, and it has always been a disaster, sometimes a shameful disaster. Because of those disasters many people have got the idea that Christianity is a coercive thing. But I'm not interested in making people live a certain way, even if I had the power to do so. I'm interested in inspiring people to listen to the heart of God. Listen. Listen to the gurgles of a baby in the arms of Mary, the creator of the universe utterly dependent on human love. Listen to the groans of a naked man dying with his arms spreadeagled and yet having the grace to whimper, 'Father, forgive'. Listen to the gentle words of the risen Lord in the garden saying to the weeping and desolate Magdalene the single word, 'Mary', the single word that announced and summoned her to new life. Listen. The role of this Chapel and this Dean is to inspire you, the heart of this university, to listen to this Jesus, this God.

Listen – and think anew. A true listening is an active exercise, a discipline that involves heart and mind and soul and strength. You would expect a Chapel to be concerned about your soul, and perhaps your heart and wellbeing. But this Chapel and this Dean are concerned about your mind as well. To keep the heart of the University listening to the heart of God means attending to the intellectual business of the university, to join and sometimes provoke the serious discussion of what constitutes a just common life, and to insist that that conversation takes place not just in personal, professional or material terms, but in the widest possible context of what it is human beings are truly involved in. Could it be that what we are truly mixed up in could be ... the heart of God?

## Disarming Generosity

I firmly believe that the best way I can serve this university is by being a Christian. I am aware that a number of people disagree, for perhaps two reasons. Some say that the Church in this country is not a very good advertisement for Christianity. The Church in this country is a straight split between liberals without doctrine and conservatives without justice. Well I say, that's all the more reason for having a Chapel and a Dean that aren't interested in having to choose. If the conservatives want doctrine then I want to tell them that the doctrine of Christ sets people free from *every* kind of slavery and that the fully human, fully divine Christ is most fully seen alongside the poorest and most marginalized people on God's earth. If the liberals want justice then I want to tell them that the most liberating thing in this world is to discover that God has put down the mighty and exalted the humble, but that his way of doing so is through the death of his incarnate Son Jesus and through Jesus' physical resurrection from the dead. Doctrine without justice is God with no heart. Justice without doctrine is heart with no God. I'm talking about *the heart of God*.

A second reason why people disagree is that they say they believe in diversity. They say this is a modern university. They say this means there are people here who are interested in the heart but have a very different notion of God or in many cases no notion of God at all. They say this means Christians should set aside their more explicit claims and advocate a general atmosphere of wellbeing and a vague sense of goodwill. To these people I say I recognize that the Church has sometimes behaved to those of other faiths and none in an oppressive, controlling and ungracious manner. I am ashamed of this aspect of Christian history and culture. But surely this is all the more reason why this university needs a Chapel and a Dean that model a truly humble, generous and gracious attitude in the face of cultural and religious diversity. A Christian faith that is truly listening to the heart of God has no desire or need to trample on those whose genuine listening inclines them to other voices. But a bland and neutered religion of wellbeing and goodwill offers nothing to people of other faiths, deprives the University of the true wonder and extent of God's gift in Christ, and denies Christians both their true heart and their true God.

So how is it to be done? How are this Chapel and this Dean to listen to people's hearts in order to inspire them and the heart of the university to listen to the heart of God? Well not just by assuming that people will, or telling them that they should. One word I have heard several times since I first came onto campus is the word 'entitlement'. Entitlement says 'We're Duke, we've made it, we're just plain superior, we're it. The rest of the world was created with the sole purpose of doing our laundry.' Well let me tell you that I'm not entitled to anything. I'm assuming nothing. The Chapel could say 'We're the biggest building on campus, we're in the University statutes, listen to God because we say so'. But this Chapel and this Dean are not saying that. If we have any authority of my own on this campus we'll have to earn it the same way as anyone else, by the wisdom of what we say, the integrity of the way we live, and the fruitfulness of our influence on those around us. My real authority as Dean of the Chapel has already been earned for me by the quality of the people who serve and worship here, and the transparency of their commitment to the God of Jesus Christ. Together they say to anyone who's listening, 'Let us tell you about a fire that never goes out – the fire of God's love for you. Let us tell you about a God of liberation, a God who can release you from the deepest prison in which you have put yourself or others have put you. Let us tell you about a shepherd who laid down his life for you, who searched for you no matter how far you strayed, who made a safe place for you where you could live and breathe, close to the heart of God.'

This is how this Chapel speaks to the heart of this University – by cajoling and surprising, by making beautiful gestures and being disarmingly honest, by being persistent and being gentle, by being bewilderingly generous and uncomfortably truthful, by asking awkward questions and by being an example. In other words, the way Jesus did it. And when we've got people's attention, we say, 'Here are a bunch of people who are trying together to respond to the heart of God. They come together on a Sunday to rediscover what that heart is. They do a host of other things alone and together and with others to try to respond to the heart of God. They get it wrong quite often, but one thing keeps them going: Jesus called them his body. That means what they do really matters to God. You may like to think about joining them sometime.'

So think of this Chapel and this Dean saying to you and to this university just this one thing. 'Listen. Listen with your heart. *Listen to the heart of God*.'

## Displaying the Heart of God

But what if you're not hearing too well? What if the cacophony of the religious marketplace or the crassness of Christians makes it hard to hear the heart of God? Then this Chapel and this Dean are going to try to *show* you the heart of God. And this brings us to John's gospel, chapter 13. When you are about to take an exam that will determine the rest of your life, and you are revising a course you never felt you fully understood the first time, one thing is very precious to you. It is the little paragraph towards the end of the scholarly work that says, 'Summary'. You skip to the back and say, 'Ah! I'll start here!' Jesus' disciples faced an exam that determined the rest of their life – an exam that began in the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus' arrest. And just before his arrest we find in John's gospel a little paragraph that could be called, 'Summary'. It is the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet.

Imagine the table of the Last Supper is heaven. Imagine Jesus' robe is his trapping of majesty. Imagine the towel is his servant humility. Jesus gets down from the table: he comes down from heaven. Jesus sets aside his robe: he takes off his majesty. He wraps himself in the towel: he takes on the humility of human nature. Already he has enacted the incarnation, God coming to us in human form. Then look what he does: he washes feet. (Remember no one wore socks or proper shoes: their feet were filthy. Washing feet then was like washing buttocks today.) Here Jesus embodies the limitless passion of God for us, his willingness to go to any lengths to win us back to him. Then, in what follows the washing of feet, Jesus displays almost every aspect of his ministry. There is the indicative mode of teaching (he says to Peter 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean'). There is the interrogative mode of questioning ("Do you know what I have done to you?"). There is the imperative mode of command ('If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet'). There is the disturbing voice of prophecy ('For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean"). There is the combative mode of controversy ('Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet"). And there is the return to the indicative mode, this time more confrontationally ("Unless I wash you, you have no share with me"). Finally the time of ministry comes to an end. Jesus takes off his towel of humility, resumes his robe of majesty, and returns to the heavenly banquet. This is a little picture of what will happen after his resurrection. Then he says 'I am your teacher and master. I have shown you who I am and what I do. Now it's your turn.'

Not bad for an executive summary. And there's more. Just notice that this is a story about washing and eating. This is a story about baptism and Eucharist, the two central practices of the Church. So it's all here in John 13. Jesus performs a microcosm of his whole ministry, and shows how in baptism, Eucharist and the washing of feet, his disciples are to follow him. That's why in a few moments I am going to wash feet. This gesture is saying that this Chapel and this Dean are here to obey the command of Jesus, in washing people and bringing them to new life, in breaking bread and sharing the companionship of God, and in humble, sometimes humiliating acts of loving service.

Washing feet sums up the gospel. It sums up the overwhelming and breathtaking love of God, displaying for us Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection. And it makes abundantly clear that our response is to be simple, physical, and socially subversive. Duke Chapel and its Dean are here to keep the heart of Duke University listening to the heart of God. But sometimes the heart of the University is hard of hearing. (I said, sometimes the heart of the University is hard of hearing.) Sometimes we don't want to be simple, we want to be classy, complex and sophisticated. Sometimes we don't want to be physical, we want to remain in the comfort of our cerebral detachment. Sometimes we don't want to be socially subversive: we want to be popular and successful. So sometimes Duke Chapel and its Dean have to step out of their regular roles, take a little risk, get down on their knees, and humbly attempt to *show* the University the heart of God. That is what I am now going to do.