

---

---

# True Religion

James 1.26-7

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday 3 September 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

---

---

It is the habit of the President of the United States each January to offer to Congress a State of the Union address. Consequently it behooves others to follow suit. Thus we get the tradition of the governor offering a State of the State address, the president of a university offering a State of the University address, and the president of the Fairlanes Bowling Association offering a State of the Alley address (you know how it goes – nine pins down, we've got a taskforce working hard on that awkward one in the far right corner).

A year ago I stated that the role of Duke Chapel was to keep the heart of the University listening to the heart of God. So this Opening Sunday it seems appropriate to offer a Heart of the University address. This has been a memorable few months for Duke University, but to understand why I think it's helpful to tell a story. The story goes something like this.

Duke was for many decades an outstanding provincial university, with exquisite architecture and a fine reputation in the South. But around 40 years ago, a number of things began to change. Most significantly a host of events took place that brought racial segregation officially to an end and began to transform the role of women in society. Meanwhile social changes like the spread of air conditioning began to make the South a less foreign place to the rest of America. And as the first Duke alums came to the end of their span of life, the endowment of the University began to grow significantly. Under visionary leadership, Duke became a national university.

Yet for a time Duke's social profile remained much as it had been. In 1984, for example, the entering class at Duke was 91% white. At that stage the university could have gone in a number of directions. It could have remained a bastion of privilege and homogeneity (even more than it, along with other highly selective colleges, still may be). It could have become overwhelmingly insular and conservative. On the other hand it could have switched and become a purely intellectual environment, or an institution dominated by the research program of the faculty to the neglect of undergraduate academic and cultural life.

And this was the critical issue in the events of last spring. For the national media the Duke Spring was a spectator sport, watching a famous university with a renowned sports program facing allegations and the bright glare of blanket publicity. For many people the events connected with painful experiences in their own lives. But the central issue was this. Has anything really changed? Is this university still in the grip of class and race and gender privilege? For a while everything seemed to go into a tailspin, as many who love this place suddenly doubted whether the heart of the university was in fact rather different from what they had assumed it to be. But in recent months the university has begun to regain its confidence and say, yes, things *have* changed. They certainly aren't perfect, but Duke is indeed a very different place in a very different world from 40 years ago. The entering undergraduate class this fall is just 58% white. Statistics don't tell you everything: but that statistic suggests a quiet social revolution.

The reason why the heart-searching of last spring was so significant was not therefore that nothing has changed. It was that the destiny of Duke University is unclear. Despite its origins as Union Institute and Trinity College in the mid-nineteenth century, Duke is still a young, not to say adolescent, institution. Like a lot of adolescents, it has plenty of energy, and is not overly hidebound by tradition. But also like a lot of adolescents, it isn't yet quite sure what it is going to be when it grows up. The issue for Duke is not so much where we are coming from – segregation, a struggling economy, a traditional class structure, along with wonderful Southern hospitality and a warm and friendly culture. The issue is where we are going. At the moment we are going in all directions. Enormous building programs, a major initiative in financial aid, impressive developments in the genome and a fine venture into global health: it's inspiring and scary at the same time. But the fear inside some of the protests of the spring was perhaps that in turning ourselves into a

major corporation, we could become just another large institution dominated by vested interests and faceless bureaucrats. In short, we could lose our soul.

Where does the heart of the university currently lie? Currently we are the best kind of teenager: searching, questioning, exploring, trying on new identities, seeing which fit better than others, seeking consensus. We are a combination of the "old Duke" and a yet-to-be defined "new Duke." Some people are distrustful of the effort, thinking that the "old Duke" was fine just the way it was. But we are still a young institution, and adolescents don't sit still.

Where *should* we be going? To answer this question I want to turn to the last two verses of the passage from the letter of James which was read for us a moment ago. "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." I'm going to draw from this summary paragraph four elements that I believe should be close to the heart of this university. Don't be alarmed by my linking religion and the university. I have no imperial desires to rechristianize this university in any institutional or cultural way, even if I had the power to do so. Read my lips: no imperial ambitions. No, I'm using the word religion in a much more general (and literal) sense, to mean "that which one regards as binding". Religion is a form of life, a regular pattern of habits and duties: in short, what one takes for granted. The heart of Duke University is what it takes for granted. What should this be?

Well, number one, the letter of James begins with the tongue. A university is a place where one learns to speak. This is a place where we learn the power of words. It is a place where we strive to use words to engage issues that elsewhere might be addressed with fists or swords or guns or bombs. It is a place where we learn the danger of words, the way speech can be used to hide and deceive and abuse as much as to reveal and build up and disclose. It is a place where we listen to words that have been spoken and written over many centuries and in many cultures, words regarded then or now as good or true or beautiful. When St Augustine in the fourth century describes his conversion to Christianity, he tells of the way he ran into the garden and fell beneath a fig tree, anguished by confusion and self-reproach, when he heard a child in the neighboring house chanting over and over again in Latin, "Tolle lege", "Pick it up and read it". We already have a wonderful university motto, but if we didn't, we could do worse than quote Augustine. "Tolle lege." Pick it up and read it. To come to this university is to enter a world in which one approaches every problem assuming somebody has faced it before, and somewhere in the Perkins library lies an astonishing discovery that could turn out to be your life's work.

Learning to speak is something Duke Chapel takes very seriously because for Christians the key place we learn to speak well is in worship. Here we begin the conversation by confessing our own sin. Here we praise God in the psalms and hymns we share with Israel and the Church through the ages. Here we read scripture and listen to the words of eternal life. Here we proclaim our best understanding of truth in the creed and conclude by saying Amen, to show that all our quest for truth is really a prayer.

We're awash with league tables that place Duke second at this, fifteenth at that, a lowly twenty-second at the other, and so on. There's a lot of talk about being the best and being excellent. But I'd like Duke to aspire simply to be good. I'd like Duke to teach people to *read*, and to teach people to *speak*, and to teach people to *listen*. This is what matters. Not being the best. But being good. Good at the things that matter. Not being the best at everything else.

Number two, James talks about "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father". In other words, for Christians, religion is about God. Now you may say, how is it possible to talk about God at a university committed to diversity? Well that's why I'm working with this understanding of religion as "what one regards as binding". If the university is to have a continual conversation about where it is going, that conversation has to take place in the light of what is ultimately real, what lasts for ever, what is so profoundly important that we seldom articulate it, what we shall finally be judged on. Christians aren't the only ones who have a stake in this conversation. Everybody does. Everybody has a sense of what they regard as binding and of permanent significance. And everybody needs to bring to the table their understanding of these matters if the university is going to have a soul. It is not about one group winning or losing. It is about a common search for truth and a shared commitment to embody truth in the goals of an institution. If the university avoids such matters in a

false attempt to keep everyone happy it will become a corporation bent only on its own glory. It will lose its soul

Number three, James talks about caring “for orphans and widows in their distress”. For Christians, this is once again about judgement. Imagine you thought life was fundamentally a competition. Imagine you had spent all your energies finding the best high school, the best college, the best employer, and the best partner, and then acquiring the best kids, the best home, and the best life assurance. And imagine you then finally stood before God’s throne, and God simply whispered to you ‘Where are the others?’; ‘Where are the others?’ And maybe you said ‘Who do you mean?’ And God said, ‘Exactly. You didn’t even see them.’

The university has to have a heart. Not just a throbbing center and identity, but a heart of compassion. ‘Orphans and widows’ is shorthand for ‘those who have no security of income and face a life of poverty’. For Israel, this always meant a close connection to the Exodus, because this was exactly Israel’s condition in Egypt before God saved them. For Christians, there are the echoing words of Jesus, “just as you did it to one of the least of these members of my family, you did it to me”. One early theologian said “the glory of God is a human being fully alive”. Being fully alive doesn’t just mean standing on your own feet and looking after yourself. Being fully alive means being able to relate in life-giving ways to all kinds of people. That’s why when it comes to those in our town and our world for whom every day is a struggle for survival, if Duke can’t relate to such people in ways that bring dignity and honor to all concerned, it is not just those people who are impoverished, it is Duke itself. If you are a student here the most political gesture you make is your choice of friends. You are surrounded by diversity, by poverty, and by fascinating people. And if you choose to make friends who are just like you, you will be the one who is impoverished.

And finally number four, James talks about keeping oneself “unstained by the world”. It’s best to read this alongside the words of Jesus in today’s gospel, “Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile? It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.” This last concern is about character. The heart of the university is finally about character. St Antony said “The time is coming when everyone will go mad; and when they meet someone who is not mad, they will say ‘You are mad. You are not like us’”. Having character means keeping your head when all around are losing theirs. It means remembering what really matters, even when everyone else has forgotten. And character is what brings together those three elements we have been talking about: speaking with knowledge and understanding, searching together for truth, and making friendships rooted in compassion and kindness.

So this is the heart of the university, the character of the university. This, I hope, is where Duke is going. And I trust Duke will continue to wear its heart on its sleeve. They will know we are Dukies by our character. And so I ask you to imagine a person speaking wisely and kindly, with knowledge and understanding. Imagine a person being able to face the truth about themselves and our world, and shaping institutions that bring together different perspectives on that profound search for truth. Imagine a person doing whatever it took to make and sustain a friendship with someone whose life is dominated by the struggle for survival. Imagine someone who seemed to be able to do all those things. I’d want to be able to stand back and say about such a person, “I wouldn’t be surprised if that person is a Duke grad. They seem to represent everything Duke stands for.” My hope is that I’d be right about that person, and right about Duke. My hope is that that person would be you.