
This is about Nazareth

Luke 2. 39-40,52

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 17 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

Those of you who read your bulletin closely will know that at the top of page two we explain what Duke Chapel does. It serves the *institution* by hosting major events in the life of the university and its members. It serves the *student body* by offering a focus for the many ways students find and explore faith. And it serves the *wider church* by embodying discipleship in a pattern of interdenominational congregational and liturgical life.

When I came a year ago to be your Dean I sensed we could strengthen each of these roles just a little bit. I felt we could serve the *university* better if we not only hosted big events but made greater efforts to offer an intellectual engagement with the major issues of cultural and college life in a way that commended the Christian story in gentle and challenging ways. I've largely seen that as my responsibility. Meanwhile I sensed we could strengthen our ministry to *students* if we offered a greater variety of styles of worship, and that has led to the wonderful new Sunday evening services in Goodson Chapel, led by Craig Kocher, Jenny Copeland, Patrick Thompson and others. And thirdly I judged that we could serve the *wider church* better by making more explicit the ways in which Duke Chapel was indeed a church, with a real congregation, and under the leadership of Nancy Ferree-Clark and Josh Hubert, along with minor alterations to the liturgy and the bulletin, that is what I believe we have done. Various people have said to me 'I thought Duke Chapel didn't get on with the university' or 'I thought students didn't go to Chapel', or 'I thought Duke Chapel wasn't a real church'. To these people I have always given the same answer: 'If that's the way you wanted it, then I'm afraid you appointed the wrong Dean'.

But after I had been here a few months I began to feel a little uncomfortable on one subject. I realized Duke Chapel was the focus of a host of projections, aspirations, interest and goodwill, from near and far. Much of this is based on the three 'crown jewels' of music, architecture and preaching. But I began to see Duke Chapel as like a big business with a large turnover and huge capital reserves but with no sustained thought being given to what to do with the capital except to accumulate more. Don't get me wrong – I'm using money as an analogy here. What Duke Chapel has masses of is not financial capital but social capital. By social capital I mean the array of lasting friendships, good experiences, good role models, life-changing moments, healthy practices and dedicated ministries people associate with the Chapel, which may not translate into money but make the Chapel an influential center of countless social, academic, theological, ecclesial, musical and student networks. And so last December I went to see the President and I said to him, "These three roles of Duke Chapel – they're all going amazingly well. But I want more. We've accumulated this huge degree of goodwill, and the nice word for it is social capital. But there's another word for it. And that word is 'power'. And I believe power is given to us to use the way God uses it. To set people free."

And so President Brodhead and I agreed it was time for Duke Chapel to do a fourth thing. It was time to take the profound influence that the Chapel has built up over the decades and begin to put it more self-consciously to work in the university, the region, and the American church. And to show its commitment the university agreed to fund a new post, what we are calling the Director of University and Community Relations. And in July we were delighted to welcome Gaston Warner to take up this appointment. I have appointed Gaston because Gaston not only has the faithfulness to love Duke Chapel as it is but the vision to imagine what Duke Chapel might become. Gaston's role is to put the broad shoulders of the Chapel behind the initiatives in Durham, the region, and the American church that are ushering in the kingdom Jesus embodied and proclaimed. The point is that people take Duke Chapel seriously, and if Duke Chapel says something is important, and gives it a profile and an endorsement, a lot of people take notice. An example is the upcoming Faith and Money conference with Ched Myers on October 14, which I strongly urge you to attend. We often think our only choice with money is either to give away a little of the interest or give away the lot. But Ched is brilliant at showing that we can use the capital for social good without giving it away, and at showing how this is what the biblical view of money was all along. Gaston's role is to help the Chapel and the Chapel community

engage in these kind of vital issues where our power as an institution and as individuals can be harnessed to the wonderful things God is already doing in the world.

But if the Chapel's work is to have any authority, if it is really going to be taken seriously by the town, the region and the American church, Duke Chapel needs to be rooted firmly in two areas. It needs to continue to be rooted firmly in the life and faith of students. From its beginning, the Chapel has been committed to ministry with students, through our own small groups, mission trips, and worship opportunities, along with those of the religious life groups on campus. The Lilly-funded PathWays program that has been running for four years opened up an opportunity to focus specifically on how faith can be transformed into ministry. Under the leadership of Keith Daniel in the last year it has been rejuvenated and refocused in offering students practical opportunities to do this. It is my conviction that the best way to find out whether you are cut out for ministry, whether you have a particular vocation to serve God and the church through a life of shaping communities of faith, is to do it for a while and see if it makes sense. And that has been the main focus of the PathWays program, through summer internships and mission trips, together with discernment groups and special courses. And today we are celebrating the fact that the people of the Southwest Central Durham Quality of Life Housing Committee have invited PathWays to use the old boarding house on West Chapel Hill Street in the West End of Durham as a residence for our four PathWays Fellows. The four PathWays Fellows, each of whom are recent Duke graduates, are spending a year full-time discerning their vocations and working for local non-profits. We are deeply appreciative of the opportunity given to the Chapel and the PathWays program by the vision of this group of neighborhood leaders. We hope this partnership will be an inspiration not just to the four Fellows themselves, but to a host of undergraduates who see the kind of opportunities that can open up for you when you really start to trust God with your own future.

Besides being grounded in the lives of students and their transformation, there is one other area where Duke Chapel must be firmly grounded if it is to speak with authority locally, regionally and nationally. And that area is Durham. More precisely, that means those parts of Durham subject to significant social disadvantage. After we received the invitation from this committee of grassroots leaders in the neighborhood to locate the PathWays Fellows in the West End, I began to explore the possibility of housing a Community Minister in the same or an adjoining neighbourhood. As many of you know I spent 10 years in community ministry myself, living and working in two socially-disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the UK. Over those ten years I increasingly experienced a split between on the one hand what we might call the 'incarnational' need simply to show people how much they mattered to God, by lingering, befriending, sharing local concerns and being residentially present, and on the other hand what we might call the 'kingdom' need to be involved in committees and programs oriented to making things better. Since moving to the US, I have sensed that the 'kingdom' pull is very strong in church culture. Poverty tends to be seen as a 'problem' that needs to be 'fixed'. When people have heard I was planning to hire a community minister, many have assumed I was setting out to 'fix' social inequality in the West End. But that's not what it's about.

I want you to think about the shape of Jesus' life. We place a huge emphasis on his last week in Jerusalem – his passion, death and resurrection. Before that he spent two, maybe three years moving around Galilee. And before that, we have to assume he spent around 30 years in Nazareth. Doing what, exactly? Today's gospel suggests four things. 'Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in divine and human favor.' Sounds good to me. Community ministry may involve a little bit of Jerusalem, and occasional moments of Galilee. But really, this is about Nazareth.

If something is wrong, and you are a person who wants to help, there are broadly three ways to do so. One is *working for*. Another is *working with*. A third is *being with*. *Working for* means doing things on behalf of other people, like physicians or attorneys do. There's a place for it, and it often makes the expert feel good, but it tends to perpetuate relationships of inequality and to inhibit real friendships, because it's rather humiliating always to need someone to do things for you. *Working with* means bringing different skills and experience together around a common goal. It can create a wonderful sense of partnership, provided that the agenda is being set by the person in need, rather than the person trying to help. But *being with* adds an extra dimension. Being with means experiencing in one's own life something of what it is to be needy, to be disempowered. It means setting aside one's plans and strategies for change, and simply feeling with the poor the pain of their situation. It means

experiencing in one's own body some of the fragility of relationships and self-esteem and general well-being that are at the heart of poverty. It means having the patience not to search around for the light switch, but to sit side by side for a time in the darkness.

Jesus spent a week in Jerusalem *working for* us, doing what we can't do, achieving our salvation. He spent three years in Galilee *working with* us, calling us to follow him and work alongside him. But before he ever got into working with and working for, he spent 30 years in Nazareth *being with* us, setting aside his plans and strategies, and experiencing in his own body the exile and oppression of the children of Israel, but also the joy and sorrow of family and community life.

Without being grounded in Nazareth, in other words without being truly incarnate, our efforts to work for the kingdom would be somewhat hollow. Yet my experience of trying to live the life of Nazareth yet work with others for the kingdom was that after 10 years I was completely worn out. That's why I haven't asked Gaston to be the Community Minister – I am asking Gaston to concentrate on *working with*. Instead I have asked Abby Kocher to take on the role of Community Minister, because I believe she is a person with the patience and understanding required to live the life of Nazareth – truly to *be with* the people of the West End and surrounding neighbourhoods, not concerned so much to make things better as to be alert to what God is already up to. Essential to this ministry of presence is living in the neighbourhood itself, which Abby is doing, rather than working out of an office in the Chapel. Through this ministry I trust Duke Chapel and any initiatives with which it may be involved will truly be grounded in the realities of life among those for whom every day is a struggle for survival. And through this ministry I trust many new friendships will be made. The Community Minister's role includes encouraging relationships between members of the Congregation and residents of the West End and surrounding neighborhoods. In simple terms this means connecting those in the West End who have something to give and something to receive with those from the Congregation and university who also have something to give and something to receive. An ancient saying in the Church is 'that which is done for love becometh wholly fruitful'. My prayer is that we shall come to see surprising fruits from this threefold ministry of influence, partnership and presence.

A few years ago an Anglican clergyman with a famously large ego wrote an autobiography entitled 'A Faint Streak of Humility'. A rather sharp reviewer said she failed to discern in the book even a very faint streak of humility. My understanding of humility is that it means a correct understanding of one's role in God's kingdom. I hope that from today people will recognize that Duke Chapel is acknowledging the power it has, and is committing itself to use that power to help set people free. I hope that from today people will see that Duke Chapel is about helping students transform faith into ministry. And I hope that from today people will know that Duke Chapel is committed to being with some of the most socially disadvantaged people of our town, and thus making the Chapel and the poorer parts of Durham more visible to one another. People may choose to see in those developments a faint streak of humility. What I want them to see is that what we're about is Jesus. And that means that this is about Nazareth.