
Make it Your Own

Ephesians 6.10-20

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 23, 2009 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

If you're on the Duke campus this week for the first time, let me remind you what the architecture and the ceremony and the grandeur of your welcome is all telling you. You've come to a place of great power. A major research university is like a city where three rivers meet. One is the river of knowledge, another is the river of money, and a third is the river of social influence. Put them all together and you have an institution that manufactures our country's leaders, our culture's values, and our nation's ideals. That's power. And when we like it and feel buoyed up by it we call that power by one of our most dazzling words: we call it wisdom. But when we don't like it and feel excluded by it and rejected by it and diminished by it we call it by one of our most suspicious words: we call it privilege.

But if you're a freshman at Duke all this is perhaps a little too much to take in. Sure, you're plenty aware of the privilege, because everyone knows it costs a colossal amount of money to study here, and either your family is wealthy enough to pay or you've been clever enough to get someone else to pay for you. Both of these entry routes are forms of privilege. But *wisdom* – now, that's a less fashionable word. Wisdom seems rather more out of reach. Right now I suspect you may be experiencing privilege as an overwhelming burden of choice. Choice is supposed to be a wonderful thing, but without wisdom choice is useless. Privilege is to be in the position of having plenty of choice. But *wisdom* is the capacity to make *good* choices.

And that's the challenge of being an undergraduate at a major research university today. The question is not, "Will I fit in?", or "Will I get good grades?", or "Will I get on the team?", or "Will I learn to tolerate my roommate's snoring and sleep-talking and sweaty sneakers and seventies soul music?", or even "Will anyone actually be *employing* graduates in 2013?" The question is, over these four years, "Will my privileged access to knowledge, money and social connections turn into *wisdom*?" You can acquire knowledge elsewhere – there's books and websites and life experience aplenty outside Duke. You can make money elsewhere – half the richest people in the country never went to college. You can establish social connections elsewhere – university isn't the only place to win friends and influence people. But these four years aren't fundamentally about those things: they're about the percolating and discerning of the shared and personal, mundane and wonderful, discoveries, adventures and reflections of body, mind and spirit that together constitute wisdom.

Becoming a part of a university is quite similar in some ways to becoming a Christian. When you are baptized you become a part of the church, and the church is at least as bewildering as a university, often a lot more so. The church stretches back and forward in time, across every nation and people, and between the saints in heaven and the faithful on earth. We're quick to jump on the small-mindedness and naked ambition and misuse of power and weakness of will. But there are also hosts of sacrificial examples of discipleship and mission and ministry and holiness, there are countless works of theological wisdom and insight, there are myriads of testimonies of hope and guides for prayerful living, there are dizzying varieties of worship and witness and music and dance, let alone polity and politics and pot luck dinners. All of this is contained in the word "church." When we like it and feel inspired and moved and transformed by it we call it the beauty of holiness. When we don't like it and see only its clumsy and cruel and self-serving humanity we call it hypocrisy or pomposity or self-righteousness.

I once sat down with four or five other people aged between 25 and 60 and we each drew a graph of our own faith journey, tracing the highs and lows of our closeness to God as if taking a printout from a heart monitor. When we shared the graphs with one another we discovered something very interesting. Some had had dramatic or difficult childhoods; some had had profound moments as teenagers. Some had grown deeply in later life. But what shone through loud and clear was that *every single one of us* had had a significant, perhaps decisive, faith experience between the ages of 17 and 24. You'd think it was "I saw God high and lifted up surrounded by cherubim and his words to me were, go and make zillions of dollars in oil speculation," but it was more ordinary than that. It was "My campus minister left town to do another job and I ended up leading

the whole group for a semester and I really grew into it and enjoyed it.” Or, “My sister got this mystery illness and it took over my family’s life and I was so amazed by her courage it changed everything for me.” Or, “I summoned up the will to go to a choir audition and for the first time in my life I discovered I could make something beautiful with other people.”

In other words, what we were all in our different ways saying was, “I found that this daunting and sometimes alienating heritage and tradition and culture of church wasn’t a distant heap of irrelevance or an oppressive burden. I somehow *made it my own*, and realized that it belonged to me as much as it did to anyone, and in fact it was a gift passed to me to enjoy and benefit from and dig deep into. I still get infuriated with it and feel let down by it and even feel unworthy of it, but it has become the source of my life... and I deeply, unalterably, love it.” That was a moment of great awakening for me, because since then I’ve sensed that to be a Christian that can live with and enjoy and even love the church, it’s vital, almost indispensable, to have found a way to make it your own, to make friends with its saints and make its books your library and make its sacraments your staging posts and make its rhythms your daily song. And it’s been at the heart of my own ministry to say to people, “Make these things your own, use them and enjoy them and love them,” and to try to show them how.

This is what the final chapter of the letter to the Ephesians is doing. What we’re given is a list of some of the most pious and abstract vocabulary in the Christian dictionary. First there’s truth, then righteousness, then peace, then faith, then salvation and finally Spirit. Many, perhaps most of us have sat in a room with other Christians and heard people toss this jargon around, in a way that made them seem either absurdly pious or way too pretentious, and made us feel either small or out of it. So Ephesians, having spent five chapters explaining in theological language what these important words mean in the life of Israel and Jesus and the church, concludes by whispering, “Hey, if you want a clue, this is how you make these cherished, but rather grand, words your own.

Truth – think of truth like a belt. It should be all the way around you, where your top half of idealism meets your bottom half of reality.

Righteousness – think of righteousness like breastplate. You may want others to admire your biceps or your shapeliness or your coat hanger shoulders or your hairy chest. But what they’re really looking at is whether your life is as truthful as your words.

Peace – think of peace like your shoes. It’s the most important garment of all, and it’s useless making it out of soft tissue, it needs to be sturdy and hardwearing, but flexible and comfortable. When you imagine peace, it’s got to be like shoes that will walk a very long way.

Faith – think of faith like a shield. A shield doesn’t stop bad things happening, it doesn’t prevent you being attacked, it doesn’t usually change the external reality that much. But it keeps your heart pumping and your life going and your spirits thumping even when the slings and arrows of favor and fortune would otherwise destroy you.

Salvation – think of salvation like a helmet. Salvation is forgiveness, healing and eternal life all wrapped into one, and it’s too much to keep in your head, so you have a helmet to keep these most precious fruits of faith safe. A helmet is like a shield – they can’t be used as weapons against others, they’re just the gifts God gives us to let us know we’re safe with him forever.

Spirit – think of Spirit like a sword. What we’ve had here is a description of the outfit of a Roman soldier, because the Roman soldier was the literal and metaphorical description of power in the life of the early Christians. But only this last item actually does something – the others are all forms of clothing or protection. And that’s because the first five are about us, whereas only the last one, Spirit, is describing a dimension of God. Think of Spirit like a sword, sharp and terrifying and dynamic and exciting and a way of focusing power in one particular place.”

What we’ve been given here is an invitation to make the language and beliefs and actions and hopes of the Christian faith *our own*, just as if we were putting on a set of clothes and leaving on them our own crease marks and stains and slight tears and worn patches. *Inhabit* the faith, the letter says, put these beliefs *to work*, make

them yours, try them out. They're given to you so you can discover what it really means to be part of the church. And what it really means to be part of the church is to be part of a people using and enjoying these gifts and allowing themselves in the process to be transformed into a reflection, sometimes good, sometimes bad, seldom perfect, but nonetheless a reflection of the crucified and resurrected body of Christ.

And that brings us back to what it means to begin life at university. The key to flourishing at a place like this isn't to be top of the class or have the most friends or to win the most athletic prizes. It's to *make the place your own*. Make lectures your mental gymnastics, make Cameron Stadium your theatre of dreams, make the orchestral rehearsal room or soccer field your place of recreation and re-creation, make Perkins library your garden of digging and planting and growing... and make this Chapel's rhythm of song and service and prayer your morning star and your entrancing sunset. Make this place your own. Make these people your people. Make this life your life.

You know how in Tom and Jerry cartoons, Jerry the tiny mouse pounds the enormous feather pillow over and over until he's made it his own and then settles down to rest into it like no one had ever slept before? Duke is like that pillow. Duke is no more than a pile of Gothic stone and a labyrinth of hospital corridors and a legend of Final Four appearances until you inhabit it, burrow into it, pile into its pillow and make it your own. Then you can allow it to make you its own – to give you experiences and adventures and friendships and learning and perspectives you'd never have imagined or dreamt of. Make it your own and then let it make you its own.

But more importantly, pound the pillow of truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation, until you find out what these words mean in body, mind and spirit, and make the life of the church your own so much that if the church is rotten there'll be no one to blame but you. And then let the sword of the Spirit make you its own and receive the heritage and destiny of the church that are more than any of us could desire or deserve.

That way you'll discover true wisdom, and true holiness. Because true wisdom and true holiness are knowing and reflecting and embodying the mind of Christ. And the mind of God in Christ is this. He has wrestled with us, he has cherished us, he has longed for us and sought us, for one reason and one reason only. Because he longs, and has shaped his whole life, to make us his own.