Sermon for 500th Anniversary of the Foundation of St Leonard’s College in the University of St Andrews

21st April 2013

Job 28:12-28
Ecclesiasticus 1:1-10
John 17:4-10
Psalm 15

“Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

T. S. Elliot *The Rock*
Chancellor, Principal, Provost, Donald, dear friends and colleagues, it is with singular pleasure that I acknowledge with deep gratitude the privilege accorded me to be your preacher here today ... as we celebrate five hundred years of St Leonard’s College and rejoice at the start of its new development as a Graduate School for the whole university.

St Andrews is in many ways my adopted home for, as a number of you are aware, my family and I lived here for sixteen years. Quite apart from that I consider myself very much a part of today’s occasion for I wear the PhD hood, as a graduate of this university.

In that first reading from Job the writer asks where wisdom is to be found. He evidently knows where it is not. It isn’t in the sea, it can’t be quarried from land.

Its worth isn’t to be estimated in the balance against any precious stone or metal, nor yet should wisdom be sold or bartered as if a commodity, however tempting and lucrative such a prospect might seem.

Meanwhile, and from their vantage of flight birds can’t observe wisdom from above.

‘Death’, however, that unfailing leveler of all things, has heard a rumour of wisdom.

Something more definite is needed, I suggest, if we are to find, or even take hold of, wisdom.

The writer of Job says, however, that the human person does not know the way towards wisdom. And yet in saying this, he places a conundrum before us. Why? Well, because those reforming clerics who founded St Leonard’s College in this town and university had every confidence, I believe, that wisdom could indeed be approached, and maybe even attained by the human person.

The route to it would be through increased understanding and learning as well as through improved well-being. By such means the mind would strengthen and with it the aim to improve personal qualities.

As a consequence of such intellectual and personal development, an approach to God’s wisdom by the human person would become possible and maybe even real, even if not always inevitable.

Through increased learning the mind would be enlarged by attention to, appreciation before, and appropriation of that improved knowledge of reality with each pointing the way
towards the wisdom that Job’s writer acknowledges comes from God, “God understands the way to [wisdom] and he knows its place”. (Job 28:12)

Even though the founding of St Leonard’s College was initially restricted and was designated to assist the the poor Augustinian clerics of the day in their learning and their maintenance a wider circle of beneficiaries soon came to profit from the advancement in life and learning that was being made available.

It was because the clerical founders of St Leonard’s College were confident that the human mind could access the wisdom of God through learning and faithful study, collegially based, that this establishment was set up. That was its job. To find the place for wisdom where it could be put within reach.

This theme is developed in our second reading. Ten glorious sample verses from the opening of Ecclesiasticus.

The writer asks, ‘who can count the days of eternity?’ There’s an essay for you in the metaphysics of temporality!

Likewise the grains of sand on the beach. And then again, ‘can the raindrops be numbered?’

Study of the whole and of its constituent parts is both invited and is there to be had. But nothing can be taken for granted. As T. S. Eliot tellingly reminded us in his poem The Rock, more information does not automatically lead to greater knowledge, and greater knowledge does not of itself yield wisdom. Something more fundamental and foundational is needed to ensure these connections work properly and thereby make the way to wisdom accessible and realisable.

God “poured out [wisdom]” so Ecclesiaticus tells us “upon all the living according to his gift; he lavished her (wisdom) upon those who love him”.

And here we encounter a thoroughly modern problem. For many, perhaps even for most in our day, wisdom and the faithfulness of simple learning that precedes it are not seen as originating with God, nor yet coming from God.

The self-confident advance of Enlightenment borne secularism has visited upon our land the marginalization of God and of his effect. Secularism, and a non-theistic approach to learning, risks sundering that which was founded here as a consequence of the gift of God,
from who we are today and what we are about as a university.

In John 17 Jesus speaks of completing the work he was sent as God’s Word to finish. In other words his human relationship to the Father is so inextricably united that there should be no divorce of that which is tangibly here and available to us in material, force and natural energy, from that eternity which our restless searching and seeking yearns to yield and make known.

On the one hand there is something eternal and unattainable in the Wisdom of God. On the other hand, however, it is accessible. It is there for those with eyes to seek it out, ears to attend to its voice, hands to sample its texture and a keen nose to test for it, together (and this is the important bit) with that sense of humble adoration before God who made it.

In a secularizing age we risk forgetting that. And as we forget it we risk losing that thread of heritage and history that was the founding mark of the college whose 500 years are marked by our presence today. It is a thread whose strands Christian faith has put within reach.

Thankfully the years in which St Leonard’s College went into some sort of closed off cul de sac are no more. We can indeed congratulate those responsible for its re-constitution in the 1970’s and the college’s contemporary re-connection with its history.

And today we rightly celebrate its extension to wider areas of graduate study in this university. But we must not be complacent. Complacency and wisdom are incompatible.

Paraphrasing, Psalm 15, ‘...the one who lives close to God is the one who knows the importance of humility in our dealings one with another as well as in the modesty of realistic self-awareness...’

Humility characterises the person who seeks to walk blamelessly, estimating when to speak that which is right. Such a person does not badmouth another, however unpleasant or disagreeable the other might happen to be!

The person journeying life this way of humility lives on the pathway of, and to, the place of wisdom.

The same can be said of the person who honours a promise, even if it be to their disadvantage. So also for those who seek no dishonest profit.
These are they who are closest to the place of wisdom.

Today we celebrate that which was established in the foundation of St Leonard’s College and made available for future generations subsequently.

It began as the perceived outflow of God’s gift of learning to advance the understanding of his people so that by what is learned and discovered, and through what is lived in reverence and humility before God, wisdom might grow and flourish.

The ongoing well-being, development and secure prosperity of St Leonard’s College are part of that heritage and lineage.

May the future of St Leonard’s College indeed be blessed by God and may God pour his blessings on you who are either part of it or whose stewardship and advancement is your care and concern.

Amen.

†Robert A. Gillies
Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney

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1 With acknowledgment to the University of St Andrews for the opportunity to be the preacher on this occasion. I was a member of the congregation for the 450th Anniversary of St Mary’s College when Jan Milic Lochman was the preacher and consider the honour given me for this occasion a deep and real privilege.

ii With acknowledgment to Lester Pittman of Charleston, South Caroline for directing my attention to T. S. Eliot in this regard.