

Sunday Sermon at Monica Wills Chapel, Professor Julian Rivers
Monica Wills Chapel, Wills Hall Sunday 5 July 2009

‘But each one should be careful how he builds’ (I Corinthians 3:10).

In 1909, exactly one hundred years ago, the University received its Royal Charter. Our first Chancellor, Henry Overton Wills, died shortly afterwards, and his sons determined to endow the university with a flagship building in his memory. Sir Isambard Owen, the then Vice-Chancellor (and Brunel’s nephew), who had done so much to establish this new institution, from drafting its statutes to designing the academic dress, thought that it would be appropriate to build the proposed monument in some modern material, such as reinforced concrete. But Sir George and Henry Wills took advice from their architect. Would reinforced concrete last for 400 years? George Oatley gave an honest answer: we do not know; it is a new material. In that case, said the Wills brothers, we are not having it out of reinforced concrete.¹ And they gave us, to Oatley’s design, what Pevsner calls ‘a remarkable piece, proof of its architect’s unflinching faith in the Gothic style’,² the Wills Memorial Building, made not out of reinforced concrete but out of traditional sandstone with ironstone flashings. The reinforced concrete of the 1920s has long since decayed, but the Wills building is still with us.

It matters how we build.

And that is the Apostle Paul’s message as he speaks to the church at Corinth. It matters how you build. The church at Corinth was riven by factions forming around different leaders, and Paul wishes to direct their attention away from the builders of the church to the building itself. When it comes to the church, it is the people who are the true building, and they are what matters. ‘Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?’ When it comes to the church, the

¹ The story is recounted in Don Carleton, *A University for Bristol* (University of Bristol Press, 1984), p. 34.

² Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: North Somerset and Bristol* (Penguin Books, 1958), p. 417.

building matters more than the builders – whether Paul, or Peter, or Apollos, or any other Christian leader.

And what is true of the church is, I would suggest, true to some extent of any human community. It is true, to some extent, of a university hall of residence. It matters how we build.

It matters how we build, says Paul, because there will be a day when the surface appearance of things will be stripped away. As in a fire, the flimsy buildings of wood, hay and straw will be burnt up, but the solid buildings of precious metal and valuable stone will survive. So when it comes to the church one needs to be an expert builder, a wise architect. It is quite possible to spend one's life carrying on an activity that looks like church from the outside – but actually it is flimsy. It is not church, says Paul, if you abandon the only foundation, which is the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ crucified and raised from the dead. It is not church if you abandon the message of the Christian Gospel, which is that by the overwhelming generosity of God shown to us in Christ, all people can now be built into this living temple, this universal house of God, this worldwide community of the people of God.

So too, to some extent, with a hall of residence. It might be called a hall, students might live there – but it might be as memorable as a budget chain hotel and as anonymous and transitory. A flimsy substitute for a hall.

So how should we build?

In his book, *Religion and Community*,³ Professor Keith Ward proposes that we think about the church in four dimensions. The church is a teaching community, a charismatic community, a sacramental community and a moral community. And although a hall of residence is not a church, there are some intriguing parallels.

³ Clarendon Press, 2000.

The church is a teaching community. So too, obviously, a university hall of residence. We aspire to be an academic community, which means we want to be free to enjoy each other's disciplines because we believe in the ultimate coherence of truth. We believe in the value of each others' subjects as such. We're part of a *university*. But our students face the challenge of instrumentalisation. This is the view, common enough, that higher education and degrees are merely training for jobs. Do what it takes to get a 2:1 and then a job, so that one can earn enough to 'have fun'. But we want our students to discover that no truth is boring, we want students who catch habits of intellectual curiosity that last a lifetime, students who see themselves as participants in one of the grandest of intellectual endeavours, thinking the thoughts of God after him.

The church is also a charismatic community. That is, the church is a community marked by the gifts of God's generosity who has given us different talents and different forms of creativity to build up the body of Christ. This is no cause for competition but for celebration as we enjoy that diversity as one body. Clearly, in a hall of residence too, we have the opportunity to encourage and enjoy each others' talents and creativity. The breadth and depth of talent of our students is astonishing. We have the chance to encourage, nurture and celebrate that. The challenge our students face in this respect is possessiveness. I know I have talents, but I am not prepared to share them. They are for my esteem, or simply my CV. We want our students to discover that the most pleasurable aspect of human creativity is not personal excellence, but the giving of pleasure to others.

The church is a sacramental community. Christianity is not a disembodied religion, a mere faith or spirituality. Rather it speaks of a God who breaks into our material world and transforms it by the resurrection of his Son. The material, the physical, is caught up in the redemptive purposes of God. So God gives us material signs of his grace – the water of baptism, the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Sacraments speak of the interpenetration of the material and spiritual. Is there anything sacramental about hall life? In a sense, yes, even here. The challenge our students

face in this respect is a very old one – in ancient times it was called Gnosticism, nowadays we would probably call it ‘virtual reality’. It is the suggestion that the material does not really matter – that perception, or experience, is everything – and therefore that the material dimension of our human existence is, as such, unimportant. It is only a means to an end. But we are whole beings, material and spiritual – so architecture, and gardens, and eating together, and all the interactions of community living speak to us in surprising and important ways. Families that don’t eat together soon fall apart. We want our students to discover that the realities of hall life both symbolize and strengthen the natural bonds of friendship, and in that sense are sacramental.

And the church is a moral community. The transformation that God brings by his Spirit changes our character, our actions, our relationships. Love God and do as you please, said Augustine, because those who truly love God long to imitate him in his purity, his goodness, his truthfulness, his faithfulness. And yes, a hall is a moral community too. Not, I hope, in the merely negative sense – learning not to do this or not to do that. Those are the crudest outward expressions of the moral life. But in the positive sense of learning to use one’s new-found independence to serve others with integrity and kindness. Our students face challenges here too – perhaps most of all the allure of a compulsive pursuit of personal pleasure in ways that are ultimately destructive of health, of relationships and of well-being. Is it too ambitious to say that we want our students to discover the wisdom of self-control?

Here at Wills, and here in this chapel, we have to ask one further question. If a hall of residence is like church, but not church, what is the relationship between them? What is this building doing here? No doubt there are many for whom its presence is strange, a relic of an alien and fast-dying culture. But I cannot agree. Generation after generation of students have experienced the value of life in community here at Wills and in other halls across the university. For many, that is a strange and a challenging discovery. It is indeed strange and challenging in a world in which truth is turned into the instrument of economic prosperity; in which creativity is handled

possessively; in which virtual reality supplants real life; and in which moral sensitivity is too often calloused by a desperate hedonism. Life in community is, in the final analysis, very strange indeed if the universe is ultimately silent, with us human beings thrown up for this short life by some blind process of chance, to make of it what we will. But it is not at all strange for the Christian. For we believe that what is ultimately real about the universe is not its terrifying meaninglessness, but its location in the purposes of a God, who is for all time in community, three-in-one, in whose likeness we are created, and in whose likeness we shall be restored. So the chapel rightly stands, even here, quietly pointing to the God who explains that strange and challenging discovery. To the God who calls us into community with himself.

As we gather this weekend to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the opening of this wonderful hall, we remember with gratitude to God those who gave us these good buildings: Sir George, Henry Hammond and Dame Monica Wills. They laid a good foundation. So too we celebrate the builders of the community that has flourished here, not least among whom is our warden for the last 12 years, Donald Shell. And we commit ourselves likewise, as we have opportunity, to be careful how we build.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.