

**Trinity College Chapel
Memorial Service for Harry Williams
13-v-2006**

The Rt Revd and Rt Hon Richard Chartres

The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.

One day when Harry was Dean of this College, one of the Chaplains came to him, very properly, to complain about an undergraduate who had been uncommonly rude and dogmatic even for a Trinity man. What made it worse was that the young man was an ordinand. "Don't worry", said Harry, "he'll be alright once he's in a parish."

As you can guess I was the rude and dogmatic young man and yet another beneficiary of Harry's friendship and reluctance to condemn. Many here could tell even more dramatic stories.

Standing in this place, I remember the electric atmosphere in the Chapel when Harry was due to preach. Of course I was too unaware then to realise then how much it all cost but the sense of reality and the authenticity born of struggle was unmistakable. At a time when sermons were widely disdained for being the chalk and talk method of instruction without the chalk, Harry revealed the power of the sermon to transcend the impersonal style proper to the lecture hall and the sermon's capacity to relate "I believe" with "I am".

The chapel was packed with surprising people and not just the pious. He communicated profoundly and as a result often frightened people. The news of his death produced the same mixed reaction on the Internet. One contributor to a chat room says "he had a fine mind and could articulate things straightforwardly with nuance - especially for those demagnetised by religious hypocrisy".

He is answered by someone who gives his name as "Sick and Tired of nuance". In criticising Harry's writings "Sick and Tired" asserts that "by an enormous effort of will" he would confine himself to "passages from Holy Scripture lest I fall into sin myself".

The last entry to date is simply "The dear, dear man, I owe him so very much."

Harry's preaching and writing was disturbing because there was so little fig leaf about it. He described the wasteland and the fantasy pavilions

we build, with such clarity and candour that it was impossible to keep them at a safe objective distance. He realised that it is impossible to convey spiritual electricity by public readings from the wiring diagram but there was life in the blood shed in the solitary wrestling before climbing into this pulpit.

He played his part in exposing the foetid atmosphere of an introverted tendency in the church, “incurvatus in se”, whose distance from love’s endeavour, love’s expense could sometimes be startling.

Harry understood the power of fantasy religion and had begun by being mesmerised by the sight of William Temple in convocation robes uttering a ceaseless stream of words in a rotund style and fruity voice. Although “I couldn’t understand a word, from that moment I knew I wanted to be a clergyman. It was nothing to do with piety. It was the glamour.”

He was indeed subsequently ordained in St Paul’s and went to serve curacies in two Anglo-Catholic London parishes. He told the story of a married ordinand at that time. The young man was at a theological college and had been detected in using contraceptives while the recipient of a grant from some high church trust. “There was the most tremendous rumpus,” Harry said, “consuming literally hours of discussion. Eventually it was decided that unless the couple gave a solemn promise never to use contraceptives again, the financial grant would be withdrawn”.

Harry abominated the real cruelty in such religious attitudes and this was also mixed with a marked disdain for the suburban character of the conventional Jehovah.

We are in a somewhat different place in our own day when the publican assumes an air of superiority because he is not like the Pharisee and the conventions and canons have melted away to such an extent that it is difficult to have conversations and to locate moral true north.

But the prison house of idolatrous religion and the God we create for ourselves is always under construction and the lethal global consequences of this activity are only too clear to our generation. It was Harry’s work to sketch the plan of the prison house and help us devise means of escape into freedom.

The prison house is partly a product of the divorce between mind and matter. “I was disillusioned”, he said, “with thinking as a purely cerebral activity a mere accumulation of ideas and juggling with them”, the frozen fruit of such thinking being “second hand convictions”. He came to see in our way of abstracting ourselves from the life in which we are in reality

participants, a systematic assault on awareness. We are set in a way of acquiring knowledge which edits out the full picture of the various ways to truth via love and beauty and which inhibits the discovery of the knowledge which lies beyond understanding.

Confronting this alienation in himself he frequently experienced himself as “uninhabited”, an outsider even to the natural order. Analysis had revealed to him the extent to which we flee from boredom and disgust with ourselves into various projections. We confect gods from the cravings of our own shadow side but once we see such projections for what they are, the old tyrannical god of the prison house fades and conviction has to come not from any neat problem-solving formula, still less any more projection, but from some kind of meeting with the Other.

The story of the Annunciation which describes a meeting initiated by an address from the angel, God’s self communication, spoke powerfully to him because he himself had such visitations, not least here in his pastoral work as a Tutor. There was an annunciation which came as he cared for a very gifted undergraduate who died young through cancer. There was the conviction which emerged out of the struggle in prayer for another pupil who had been gravely injured in an accident.

Modern Europe has its roots in a rebellion of the many against the tyrannical god of the prison house with his imperious will and the regimes which he sustained. The Church has sometimes struggled to keep this god on his throne but his eclipse creates the space for the entry once again of the God of the Annunciation. The true and life-giving God comes in the vulnerability and suffering of his human face, Jesus Christ. The true God does not assert power over us but constantly evokes life and brings new life to birth out of the dark material which we encounter when we can bear to embrace our own destitution and even death.

The god we invent is often the way in which the bruised ego re-ascends as we surreptitiously deify ourselves. Recognising this, Harry in his autobiography was able to describe his “unbelief” as in part “a clearing up operation making straight a highway for the God who disclosed himself to me in my fits of awareness”.

The painful journey was and is necessary because the merchant who finally sold everything to buy the pearl of great price would never have been in the position to do so if he had not been trading in pearls in a small way for a considerable period.

It is good to recall Harry in this place which he loved, not to eulogise him for that often conceals a person’s greatest merits. Harry loved Trinity – “the place where I have been most happy and have found the truest and

most lasting friends. Henry VIII figures in my private Kalendar of Saints, not because he founded the Church of England [although I think well enough of him for that] but because under the influence of his sixth wife, Catherine Parr, he founded Trinity”.

He was very fortunate in his many friends and not least in those who lived in the Lodge during his time in the College. He was as so many can testify an immense life enhancer. “I never knew someone”, said one of his younger friends, “who was so much fun and so little concerned to conceal his faults”. He was sometimes hypersensitive and as another generous friend said “both very loveable and very exasperating”. The Harry who could see through so much cant and fantasy was still capable of being wounded when he was taken for “a nobody” by the waiter at a first class hotel.

We shall remember him and miss him as supremely good company over a good meal with something to drink. He loved young people once they were out of nappies and made sense. God-children are here to bear witness.

It is not every clergyman of the Church of England who has had the accolade of having a bar named after him but such is the case at the Erin Arts Centre in the Isle of Man. Don't be deceived, this is no ordinary “Harry's Bar” but as the photograph on the wall makes clear, the dedication is to Harry the monk.

Harry has a final surprise for us. Robin Baird Smith asked him after the publication of his autobiography to write a book of the “What I really believe” variety. He always refused but the typescript found in his drawer after his death does exactly that. It is due to be published this autumn under the title “Living Free”.

Now I can see Harry in my mind's eye in this very Chapel when a preacher had gone on too long desperately waving his wrist watch in the air and I must hasten to my conclusion.

Unlike Rousseau, Harry was aware that he had not been born free. We salute his memory in the hope and confidence that he has now become a part of that mystery of true freedom, that freedom which the world cannot give, where is found the joy hard won from the dark materials of life and the love which passes all understanding.

Rest eternal grant unto him, O Lord
And let light perpetual shine upon him.