

THE PLANTING OF SARUM COLLEGE

I have been asked to say what you no doubt are hoping will be a few words about the foundation of the College. Actually I prefer the word “Planting” in the horticultural sense. Old men forget or embroider the past in a random way and I expect some of you may have different versions of the events. Of course the College had had a long and distinguished previous history as a Theological College and had trained hundreds of men to serve the Ministry. Women weren't invented in those far-off days. (Footnote: That is an ironical remark.) It was abruptly closed by the financial necessities of the Church but with quite unnecessary brutality – the Principal read of its closure in the press before he was informed by Church House.

The Trustees and Governors were then faced with a problem not unlike that confronting the Labour Party – What to make of the rubble that was left. Some of us wanted to sell the premises and invest the capital in a Charity to support Clergy Training. Like others I felt that the situation of the buildings in the Close was potentially worth far more than its property value. After a good deal of political skulduggery we decided – I think by a majority of one – to attempt to create something entirely new: a daunting but exciting dream. (Dream on Jeremy Corbyn.)

In Bruce Duncan we found the man (in those days it was inevitably a man) we were looking for to lead the project: someone with long experience of Church institutions, who was entrepreneurial and willing to take risks – we could only offer him a three year contract. And he had a silver tongue – which is a euphemism for successful fundraising. I vividly remember sitting with him in my study looking out over the Close with a blank sheet of A4 and brainstorming the headings which might give institutional shape to our dreams. Something original for the Spirit to make, something for the future not the past, imaginative, wide ranging, perhaps even crazy.

Well the rest as they say is history. But what a history! The motto of my School was some words of St Paul *Dat Deus Incrementum*; It is God who makes things grow. Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God makes things grow.

So we dug a small hole in the rubble and popped an acorn into it. Now it is a sturdy oak tree. Here God has used a succession of wonderfully talented and brave men and women to tend the young tree. It has been a formidable and often anxious task, at times walking on the edge of a cliff. I can't tell you how much I have admired their devotion and steadfastness. They are the heroes of the story. A few miles South of Marlborough In Savernack Forest this morning I passed a place where the road makes a loop round a huge old oak tree that was there when Elizabeth the First was on the throne; so the future holds much promise. Oaks have long lives.

If you will indulge an old man I have one more thing to say. Walter Wink has taught us that all institutions have an angel or *daimon* – a presiding spirit for better or for worse. When St John in the *Revelation* is instructed to write to the seven Churches in Asia he is told to write not to the church but to the *Angel of the church*. Sarum College has its Angel or *Daimon*. That is, the sponsor of its ethos. It is important that those who serve the College should know and name the angel of this place so that we and the *daimon* work together. I am not St. John and I would not dream of sending the angel any instructions or admonitions. But I would like to whisper in her or his ear my hope that from time to time a passage from the *Cloud of Unknowing* was read aloud to the whole community – particularly perhaps that one where it says, “*Of God himself no man can think. God may well be loved, but not thought. God is to be grasped by thought never, but only by Love.*”

HGD

September 2015