

CANTERBURY OPENING SERVICE  
The Rev. John Maxwell Kerr, SOfc,  
Episcopal Chaplain to the Faculty, Staff, and Students - College of William and Mary  
Sunday, August 22, 2010 – 9:30 a.m. - Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Welcome to the Colleges of William and Mary. It may seem a little harsh and unfeeling to begin the first sermon of many you will hear in this university by mentioning examinations.

Please don't worry. I shan't speak of any exam you will ever have to take, nor any exam you will ever have taken. I'm just interested (as your Chaplain) in how you will relate to this world of the university.

It has been called the hardest exam in the world. Since 1932, it has been a formal part of the qualifying set of papers to become what is called a "Prize - or Examination - Fellow" of the College of All Souls at Oxford University.

The exam itself was really simple. It consisted of a single word, always a noun. Crowds of people gathered outside the College each year on The Day, waiting to learn what the word might be. If you were a candidate, you'd be admitted into the exam room; you'd sit down in front of a completely blank piece of paper and, when permission was given, you would turn the blank page over. And there it would be; one word, printed there all alone, looking, someone said, like a small incendiary device. Words like, "water" or "death" or even, "courage," to which one candidate famously simply wrote, "This is." Just that. He was rejected for using too many words.

You get three hours to display your brilliance. 'Candidates may start writing now.' Only two candidates out of all those who applied would succeed. What do you think? Does the mere thought of this turn your blood to ice water or does it excite you and set you on fire? I'd really like to have you say, giving reasons, because it will tell me a lot about your spiritual life.

The Oxford examiners were not looking for your command of a syllabus: they were looking for genius. You've written exams, and successfully, or you wouldn't be here. And lying in front of you in the "outer college" of William and Mary are further exams on the syllabus, assignments, analytical book reviews, lab reports, final year dissertations, and the like. In all of these, the questions will be convergent; they'll close in on right or wrong answers. "Columbus sailed the ocean blue in what year?" "Pi = 3.14159265358979323846... please continue as you are able." That sort of thing. The sort of thing you can study for, and for which we will oblige you to study here in lecture courses, laboratories, seminars, maths problems classes. This is the education for which you pay fees. This is the content you find in textbooks – expensive textbooks! This is what people outside the university think Higher Education is all about, but they are wrong. This is merely what the "outer college" is about: and we do (of course) do this supremely well here.

Divergent questions are different; more like, "How many uses are there for a blanket?" Questions about God are sometimes mistakenly thought to be convergent. Questions about faith are sometimes thought to be convergent. You can certainly have convergent questions about religions. But, about faith? God? About what it would mean for you to be a spiritual person? And what sort of relationship might you have with God, or even other human beings? Ultimate questions; and the "inner college" is about searching for answers.

That amazing first sentence in the Epistle should put you on your guard: "You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words

made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them." [Hebrews 12: 18]

This is a sentence that might describe the "inner college." And it certainly isn't some kind of inner circle of those who belong, a kind of insiders' clique. This "inner college" doesn't appear on our website. It has no exams. No fees! It has no assigned classrooms, lecturers or reading lists. This "inner college" is something very like the soul of this academic community. It is quite immeasurable. Entirely intangible. But it's no less real for all that. I have heard it described as "the love of learning and the desire for God." This "inner college", of which you are now a member, goes back 'way beyond our foundation in 1693. It is common to William and Mary, mediaeval Oxford, Cambridge, Paris, Bologna; to all the gathered communities of scholars there have ever been. I have even heard it said that UVA has a soul, of a sort, at least in theory, but perhaps that was just someone feeling sorry for people who couldn't get into William and Mary.

I know there is an "inner college" because I have enjoyed been part of one almost all my working life.

One more thing you should know. There are people who are members of the "inner college" of this university who have never been into a lecture theatre except to clean it. They are more truly in touch with the soul of this place than some of our most senior and distinguished professors.

If there were an entrance exam for the "inner college", I suspect it would have to be at least as broad and divergent as the All Souls' prize exam. "Love", "Learning," or better, "God."

Jesus healed a woman on the Sabbath [Luke 13: 10 – 17]. The indignant leader of the outer synagogue stood up and sputtered, "That's not on the syllabus! The set text says, "There are six days on which work ought to be done." And the exams will require you to know that, and the contents of the footnotes on pages 38 - 56! You'll never get a GPA of 4.0 on God's Own Examinations if you get distracted by this man!!"

To which, Jesus, teaching from the heart and very soul of faith, says, "You've rather missed the point if you think you know the answer to God and our relationship with God to three significant figures." If there were an examination for entry to the Kingdom of Heaven it would be one of those one-word questions they had on the All Souls' exam. The word might be "compassion," or even, "God."

So here you are, enrolled in the College of William and Mary, and on Friday, the President, Faculty, Staff and current students will welcome you through the arch there in this Wren Building in our excellent service of Convocation. But you are also a member of the inner college, you are part of the soul of this place and you will always be so, long after you graduate. Or you will be as long as your mind and soul are still growing, still being fed, still asking ultimate questions and rejecting trivial, convergent and pat answers. Ours is a serious and a joyful calling. Welcome to both the inner and the outer colleges of William and Mary.

Amen

(I am indebted to my great friend, Professor Charles Taliaferro, of the Philosophy Department of St Olaf for his enlightening views on "the inner college" presented by him in "The Last Lecture" to the Graduating Class of 2010 in that college.)