Commemoration of Benefactors
Sermon
(22.11.23)

The building in which we are gathered tonight was once the bed of a sea. It's constructed, like other parts of the college including the Queens Building, from a Middle Jurassic oolitic limestone called Ketton Stone, named after the village from near where it's still quarried, an hour or so north of here, close to Rutland. Ketton Stone has for centuries been valued by architects including Christopher Wren; valued for its integrity and its creamy yellow hue, which in sunshine glows that rich buttery colour that I, for one, strongly associate with Emmanuel.

If, on your way out tonight, you pause briefly in the cloisters and peer closely at the stone of the columns and arches, you'll see that the micro-terrain of the stone is….bubbly in structure. If you put out a hand, and touch it with your fingertips, and you'll feel an oddly rough-smooth texture. Rough because it's stone, smooth because this limestone is formed of countless millions of tiny spheres, each under 2mm in diameter, so that it looks rather like highly compressed tapioca. These little spheres are called ooliths, also known as egg-stones, from which the adjective 'oolitic' comes, and around 170 million years ago they were being formed on the bed of a warm, shallow, tidally agitated sea, as calcite precipitated in layers out of super-saturated water to form around a starting 'seed' of debris, a tiny fragment of shell, for example while intertidal currents rolled them back and forth on the sea-bed, smoothing and sphere-ing them, while ammonites sculled above them, and agile, needle-toothed theropod dinosaurs stalked the shoreline.

Why am I telling you all this? Well, for one thing I find it just…really interesting! And secondly, because I think that a deep-time perspective is a valuable one to inhabit now and then, both imaginatively and ethically.

'Deep time' is the name given by the writer John McPhee to the dizzying expanses of Earth history that stretch away from the present moment. Deep time is measured in units that humble the human instant: epochs and aeons, instead of minutes and years. Deep time is a chronology kept — in varying depths — by rock, stalactites, sediments and the crustal drift of tectonic plates.

Deep time may seem at first inspection to be a purely geophysical concept. I've long been fascinated by deep time because since childhood I've been a mountain-climber — and deep time is laid very bare in mountains. Over the past decade or so, though, I've found myself increasingly interested in what might be called the ethical implications of deep time. For deep time opens into the future, as well as into the past. The Earth will fall dark when the sun exhausts its fuel in around five billion years. We stand with our toes, as well as our heels, on a brink. And to think deeply about the long-term future is necessarily to consider the legacies we are leaving, both as individuals and as a species.

There is, of course, a dangerous comfort to be drawn from deep time. An ethical lotus-eating beckons. What does our behaviour in the present matter, one might ask, when *Homo sapiens* will have disappeared from the Earth in the blink of a geological eye? Viewed from

the perspective of a mountain, or an oolite, human morality may seem absurd — crushed to irrelevance. Assertions of value can feel futile; a flat ontology entices: all life is equally insignificant in the face of eventual ruin. The extinction of a species or an ecosystem surely cannot matter in the context of the planet's vast cycles of erosion and uplift.

We should resist such inertial thinking: indeed, we should urge its opposite — deep time as a radical perspective, provoking us to action, not apathy, helping to develop the awareness that we all exist as part of a web of gift, inheritance and legacy, stretching over countless years past and countless to come.

One of the best questions I know was asked by Jonas Salk, the Nobel-Prize winning virologist who developed one of the first polio vaccines, and made it available for free to the world. Salk's question, posed towards the end of his life, was this: 'Are we being good ancestors?' It's a question that first stops you, then searches you. *Are you being a good ancestor?* For to be a good ancestor is quite different to being a good parent, or grandparent. It means extending care to people you will never meet, decades, centuries, even millennia hence.

It is very hard to be a good ancestor. Humanity — or rather certain sections of humanity — is doing a very poor job of it at present; as we lay down our future fossils and strata-markers-to-be, we appear less as benefactors than malefactors. Next summer, something is likely to happen that hasn't happened for 11000 years or so: the change of a geological epoch. In August 2024, the International Chronostratigraphic Commission is expected to approve the formal designation of a new epoch: The Anthropocene — the epoch of humans. The Anthropocene will succeed the Holocene, the epoch in which the majority of human flourishing has occurred. All of us here tonight, therefore, will probably be part of 'Generation Anthropocene'. At the heart of the idea of the Anthropocene is the notion of what might be called 'future retrospect'; the looking-back from a temporally far-distant point, millions of years hence, to scrutinise the signatures laid down in the strata record by human activity during this new epoch. The agree start-date for the Anthropocene epoch is likely to be 1950, a year chosen for the double 'golden-spike' of nuclear fall-out from the early atomic weapon tests and the massive increase in nitrogen use as part of the post-war 'Green Revolution' in agriculture. Our strata signatures will also be formed of absences as well as presences; currently, the vast majority of mammalian biomass is concentrated in humans and intensively farmed ungulates: cows, pigs and sheep, while the background extinction rate for other mammals accelerates frighteningly away.

Thinking about our legacies, our inheritances at present, therefore, is a forbidding task: among the future relics of the Anthropocene epoch will be the radioactive fallout of our atomic age, the crushed and drowned foundations of our cities, and the fossilised spines of millions of intensively farmed ungulates. Philip Larkin famously proposed that what will survive of us is love. Wrong. Presently, what will survive of us are nitrogen spikes, swine bones and lead-207, the stable isotope at the end of the uranium-235 decay chain.

To be a *good* ancestor means dreaming responsibly of the history of things to come. It means weighing what you will leave behind for epochs and communities who have not yet been imagined: the 'good inheritance' left behind by the 'forebears' of whom we heard

spoken in the verses from Ecclesiasticus we heard earlier in the service, both those forebears who have 'left a name behind them' and those who 'have no memorial' – for good is transferred intergenerationally in many forms, not all of them 'famous'.

'Good ancestry' is sometimes also called 'cathedral thinking', after the imagination of those builders, architects and benefactors of the Middle Ages who first conceived of Chartres or Notre Dame; who decided where those vast houses of worship should rise from the land and what they might become. These people worked towards the common purpose of building something that would be lasting *sub specie aeternitatis*, and also strikingly, devotionally beautiful. They wished to contribute to a vision of the future they knew they would never see realised in their own lives, but rather several generations hence. Notre-Dame took just under two centuries to be built: 1163-1345. Chartres took 126 years, from 1134-1260.

As you all know, Emmanuel's keystone story, if it can be called that, was Walter Mildmay's remark to Elizabeth I on the occasion of his founding of the College in 1584: *'I have set an Acorn, which when it becomes an Oake, God alone knows what will be the fruit thereof.'* Mildmay was a good ancestor, a cathedral thinker.

I've always liked the idea of Emmanuel as an oak tree. Oaks are, at least in arboreal terms, immensely long-lived; three hundred years to grow, three hundred years to thrive, three hundred years to die, nine hundred years alive. Not only are they long-lived and durable (our word 'robust' comes from the scientific name for the oak, *Quercus robur*), but they're also communities of exceptional diversity. Around 2300 species are known to be associated with oak trees (including 38 birds, 716 lichen and 31 mammals) — a higher number than any other species of British tree.

'I have set an Acorn, which when it becomes an Oake, God alone knows what will be the fruit thereof': Mildmay's '*God alone knows…'* interests me as a phrase. For it seems to me that a vital part of good ancestry is relinquishing control, is *not-knowing* the exact outcome of one's actions. Instead one must plant acorns — and trust that they will grow, through a time deeper than one's own, flourishing into first trees and then forests that are thriving and communities of diverse life, human and more-than-human. We might even, I think, go so fa as to name that mode of generous not-knowing as a definition of 'hope'.

So: I end my sermon hopefully: inviting you all to offer thanks to — and an honouring of — our benefactors, *our* good ancestors, who have helped to grow today's community, and in the hope that we ourselves may in turn prove good ancestors to those who will come after us.

—— Professor Robert Macfarlane