

# The Preaching of the Word at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church

215 Richmond Road, Williamsburg, Virginia 23185-3534

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## Living Like Royalty

**The Book of Proverbs 31: 1-9**

**The Revelation to John 1:1-6**

**The 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time,  
and students return to The College of William & Mary**

**August 28/29, 2010**

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A cartoon in this week's **The New Yorker** magazine captures our dilemma: an infant, clad only in a diaper, crawls through an ornate portal emblazoned with the single word "LIFE" and enters a maze which stretches on and on as far as the eye can see.<sup>1</sup> The cartoon is not "ha ha" funny but it is revealing in its poignancy.

Life as an unending maze seems an apt figure. In preschool we learn the art of sharing the toys and the books; our first days at college we learn our way around campus; we spend days discovering the skills we need to make a contribution. The maze goes on and on: last week we said goodbye to friends who in their eighties are adapting to a new home in Colorado; and I remember sitting with a dear friend who told me that over the years she had learned to live but now she needed to learn how to die and did not know to do that.

This "LIFE": what is it for? How do we do it truly and well? We didn't ask for it? What does it mean? And what is our place in finding this out?

Anthony T. Kronman raises these questions in a book with eyebrow raising title, **The End of Education: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life**. Kronman is the Sterling Professor and former Dean of the Law School, and teaches humanities at Yale. He describes the vision of the founders of the first American colleges:

In their minds, a college was above all a place for the training of character, for the nurturing of those intellectual and moral habits that together form the basis for living the best life that one can—a life of discernment and piety, shaped by the example of the great men of the past and enlivened by a deep and unassailable love of God. Such a life might be described as the life of a Christian gentleman...

... a Christian gentleman might pursue one of several different careers—  
...he might become a minister, lawyer, teacher or something else of that kind. But they would have rejected the idea that their college had been set up as a vocational school to prepare its students for their post-graduate employments. They would have said it had been created for a more elementary purpose—to provide the common base of character on which success and honor in all these

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<sup>1</sup> Gahan Wilson, **The New Yorker**, August 30, 2010, 38

endeavors depend. They would have insisted that [their college] had been established, first and most importantly, for the good of its students' souls.<sup>2</sup>

Although Kronman was thinking of the puritan founders of Harvard College the same was true of the Anglicans at The College of William & Mary. Begun as a school for the sons of colonists and Native American young men (hence the heritage of "The Tribe," formerly "The Indians"), the royal charter of February 8, 1693 describes its purposes:

Forasmuch as our well-beloved and faithful subjects, constituting the General Assembly of our Colony of Virginia, have had it in their minds, and have proposed to themselves, to the end that the Church of Virginia may be furnished with a seminary of ministers of the gospel, and that the youth may be piously educated in good letters and manners, and that the Christian faith may be propagated amongst the Western Indians, to the glory of Almighty God; to make, found and establish a certain place of universal study, or perpetual College of Divinity, Philosophy, Languages, and other good Arts and Sciences,<sup>3</sup>

William & Mary was founded as an institution of the Anglican Church. Its first president, James Blair, was an Anglican clergyman—though I should like to note that he was educated at the universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh and first ordained by the Church of Scotland—and all professors were required to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England.

There was no law school or business school or school of education or marine science. Students took classes in the School of Moral Philosophy, including logic, rhetoric and ethics; the School of natural philosophy, which included not only physics but metaphysics, and mathematics; and the Divinity School taught prepared students for ordination. They had to go to England to be ordained by an English bishop. The Church of England perhaps has wished recently that it could reinstate that practice to make sure American bishops don't do anything they might disapprove.

The College of William & Mary, as Kronman says, "was above all a place for the training of character, for the nurturing of those intellectual and moral habits that together form the basis for living the best life that one can." The education equipped Christian gentlemen to be moral citizens, civic leaders and to live a good human life. They may not have asked about "the meaning of life," but they received an education that provided resources to address that question.

Kronman's thesis—and I am in no ways qualified to address the accuracy of his characterization—is that colleges and universities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century lack not only the confidence but also the curriculum and appropriate criteria to raise in significant ways the question of the meaning of life. They are effective in preparing students for highly competitive graduate schools; they are terrific at providing the skills needed to get a job in a complex economy and society; they may provide an ideological template of political correctness to judge matters; but they do not address the question of human living because who among us is qualified to speak to that the topic? Kronman insists, however, that the question of the meaning of human life is inescapable:

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony T. Kronman, **The End of Education: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) 49.

<sup>3</sup> The Charter of The College of William & Mary from the website of the Earl Gregg Swem Library: <http://swem.wm.edu/departments/special-collections/exhibits/exhibits/charter/charter/>

The question of how to spend my life, of what my life is for, is a question posed only to me, and I can no more delegate the responsibility for answering it than I can delegate the task of dying.<sup>4</sup>

Surely Kronman is right. The question of the meaning of life will not go away. As evidence I offer an address given at the Harvard Business School last Spring and reprinted in the most recent issue of **The Harvard Business Review**. An “Editor’s Note” in the journal explains the situation:

When the members of the class of 2010 entered business school, the economy was strong and their post-graduation ambitions could be limitless. Just a few weeks later, the economy went into a tailspin. They’ve spent the past two years recalibrating their worldview and their definition of success.<sup>5</sup>

The graduating class asked Professor Clayton M. Christensen to share his wisdom about “meaning in his own life.” They had learned about business; now they asked for wisdom for their lives. Christensen counseled students to invest time contemplating the meaning of their lives.

For me, having a clear purpose in my life has been essential. But it was something I had to think long and hard about before I understood it. When I was a Rhodes scholar, I was in a very demanding academic program, trying to cram an extra year’s worth of work into my time at Oxford. I decided to spend an hour every night reading, thinking, and praying about why God put me on this earth. That was a very challenging commitment to keep, because every hour I spent doing that, I wasn’t studying applied econometrics. I was conflicted about whether I could really afford to take that time away from my studies, but I stuck with it—and ultimately figured out the purpose of my life.

Had I instead spent that hour each day learning the latest techniques for mastering the problems of autocorrelation in regression analysis<sup>6</sup>, I would have badly misspent my life. I apply the tools of econometrics a few times a year, but I apply my knowledge of the purpose of my life every day. It’s the single most useful thing I’ve ever learned. I promise my students that if they take the time to figure out their life purpose, they’ll look back on it as the most important thing they discovered at HBS. If they don’t figure it out, they will just sail off without a rudder and get buffeted in the very rough seas of life.... My purpose grew out of my religious faith...<sup>7</sup>

Religious faith has always been concerned with the meaning of life. That is why I put before you that odd, seldom read passage from the last chapter of the Book of Proverbs, “the words of King Lemuel,” the words “that his mother taught him.” Nobody knows who King Lemuel was but he was not among the kings of Judah and Israel. He was not a Jewish king but that’s not a problem because the wisdom needed to live a human life is not confined to one religion or one philosophy or one people.

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<sup>4</sup> Kronman, 15

<sup>5</sup> “Editor’s Note” to Clayton M. Christensen, “How Will You Measure Your Life?” **The Harvard Business Review**, July/August 2010, 1.

<sup>6</sup> I did enjoy the obvious amusement of members of the economics faculty of The College of William & Mary as I rattled off these words without a clue to their meaning!

<sup>7</sup> Christensen, 4.

The Book of Proverbs instructed young men how to live a human life; it still instructs us, young and old, men and women. For thirty chapters Proverbs has lead up to this moment when the king instructs the students how to reign as royalty. And lest we think this is all about the guys, we should note King Lemuel learned these lessons from his mama. The lesson begins, “My mama done tol’ me.”<sup>8</sup> And what Lemuel’s “mama done tol’” him is how to reign as a king. The reader is treated like a person “on the threshold of power.”<sup>9</sup>

Studying the Book of Proverbs we begin like a kid and slowly are brought to maturity in a larger world. In later chapters the student learns how to behave around a king:

Do not put yourself forward in the king’s presence  
or stand in the place of the great;  
for it is better to be told, “Come up here,”  
than to be put lower in the presence of a noble. (Pr: 25: 6-7)

Proverbs prepare wise students to live like royalty:

Those who love a pure heart and are gracious in speech  
will have the king as a friend (Proverbs 22:11).

Those who talk trash will have no one as a friend, but those “gracious in speech” will discern how to speak to power and with power.

Now, at the end of Proverbs King Lemuel and his mama tell us how royalty live. This kind of talk about living like royalty may surprise us but it shouldn’t: from start to finish the Scriptures tell us this is God’s plan. At the very beginning of the story God frees slaves from Egypt, but why? Because God has a plan for these people: “you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Ex.19:6).

In the book of the Revelation to John, the last book of the Bible, Christ is honored and praised because he has “made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father” (Rev. 1:6), and tells us we “will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years” (Rev. 20:6). God has big plans for human life.

The notion of living like royalty may grate on us not only because of its unfamiliarity but also because of its decadence. The writers of the Scriptures were well aware with the failures of royalty. The books of Kings and Chronicles chronicle the dissipation of the kings of Israel and Judah just as our newspapers and magazine highlight the high jinks of the royal families of Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East, not to mention the public disgraces of democratically elected officials of the American republic. All of that is precisely what King Lemuel’s mama warned him about:

Do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings.  
It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine,  
or for rulers to desire strong drink;  
or else they will drink and forget what has been decreed.

Please hear me carefully: this is not turning into a temperance sermon. Royalty is warned about the temptations of sex and strong drink and self-indulgence because these can

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<sup>8</sup> Johnny Mercer, “Blues in the Night,” in Robert Gottlieb and Robert Kimball, editors, **Reading Lyrics** (New York: Pantheon, 2000) 436-7.

<sup>9</sup> I am deeply indebted to Christine Roy Yoder’s, “On the Threshold of Kingship: A Study of Agur (Proverbs 30), **Interpretation**, Vol. 63 No. 3, July 2009, 254-263.

cause people in authority to default on the responsibilities a society has entrusted them. We've heard things about that on television, haven't we?

The fabulous wealth decorating royalty can allow them to serve no one but themselves. Last month the parking wardens in London "clamped" the tire of an automobile belonging to a member of the royal family of the Persian Gulf oil emirate Qatar. The car was parked outside of Harrods department store. There is no parking on the street outside of Harrods. This prince or princess felt privileged to park anywhere. I've never heard of the make of the car: it was "a Swedish-built Koenigsegg CCXR, retailing at \$1.9 million."<sup>10</sup> (I suppose that's why I've not heard of it.) Some monarchs assume they can do whatever they like.

King Lemuel's mama decisively disabuses her son of that idea and shows him a different vision of royalty. This king is not to confine his company to the rich but attend the poor; and he is not only to listen to the poor but to speak for the poor, to be their advocate:

Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute.

Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

For the Scriptures to live truly as royalty is to use power and ability to bless others.

God means for us to live like royalty but not any kind of royalty. King David, the ideal king of Israel in spite of all, sang of a royal reign that blessed all the people:

One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God,  
is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,  
gleaming from the rain on the grassy land. (2 Sam 23:3-4)

That's what it is to live like royalty: to be like the dawn rising on a new day, a shining light that makes things grow. No, I can't say know exactly what that means, but doesn't that sound richer and deeper and more exciting than simply doing whatever pleases you or what gets you through another day?

The Book of Proverbs reminds us God intends grandeur for humanity, the dignity and majesty of royalty. God does mean for us merely to get by. God wants more for us than just our happiness; God means for us to be a blessing wherever we go, wherever our light shines.

The Book of Proverbs reminds us also that we are not alone. We may feel alone; we may seem to be alone; but that is not finally true. As we contemplate the maze of life, that unending maze of life, we remember also that God's love for us is unending.

The Book of Proverbs assures us—and this is one of the first lessons people are supposed to learn in Proverbs from early in chapter 3:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.

In all your ways acknowledge the LORD, and God will make straight your paths.

Even in the tangled, confusing maze of life: "God will make straight your paths."

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<sup>10</sup> John F. Burns, "In a Summer of Austerity, a Parade of Super Cars from the Gulf Turns Heads," **The New York Times**, August 27, 2010, A5.

