



GRADUATION ADDRESS | Thursday 7 February 2019

Let me begin with my personal and warm congratulations to you, our graduates this evening, and to your teachers, and all those who have supported you through your studies. Congratulations.

An occasion like this invites some reflection—particularly for those of you who finished your course ... What has it meant for you? Have you changed, in some ways? Did your studies provide you with what you expected?

Over the years I have known many people who went to Bible college or theological college imagining that this would give them all the answers: you know, how to explain to someone else all about God and the Trinity and salvation and creation and eschatology and all that. But what happened was that instead of finding a neat package of answers, we found more questions, and much more challenging questions.

Theological study is not so much about having all the answers as it is about knowing your way around the questions and understanding the ways people have lived with and explored those issues, for thousands of years even, and learning how to live, creatively, with all that. We call it the Christian tradition, which is a beautifully rich and diverse living stream within which we can all find our place.

I do hope in some ways that study has changed you.

Of course, there can be some changes that are not so helpful. You may also have seen this little quotation that has been doing the rounds on social media:

“Jesus said, ‘Who do you say that I am?’”

And they replied, ‘You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the ‘kerygma’ in which we find the ultimate meaning of our interpersonal relationships.’

And Jesus said, ‘What?’”



There is a great temptation in thinking that we have actually understood something, when we have learned some long words. There are important technical terms in theology; we need them. And we also need to learn what they mean, and how to explain them, without losing their depth and meaning.

What difference has it all made to you? I hope that it has been a richly rewarding experience, and although you may now think you are glad to be finished, I hope you are not finished. Rather, I hope you have found things you want to go on exploring, more books to read and maybe more study to do, perhaps after a little rest; and more questions ...

One thing that happened to me, somewhere between when I started my PhD and when I finished, I needed these. (My spectacles.) Somehow they had started to make the font size in books and everything else I wanted to read much smaller. Ever since, I have needed these to help me see.

I wonder what you can see now that perhaps you didn't see before. And I wonder if there are things you don't see any more: 'blinded by the light of God and truth and right', as a famous song once put it.

You will know that in the New Testament Gospels there are many stories about people who can or can't or even won't see.

John Chapter 9 has a story about a man born blind, but actually the whole chapter is about who really is blind. And it's not him. And that story gives rise throughout the long history of Christian spirituality to the idea of spiritual blindness, which by its very nature we don't realise, but need others to help us to face, and deal with. Yet in fact, as Jesus put it, we are so concerned about the speck of sawdust in another person's eye we do not even recognize the tree trunk in our own eye.

Right now, there is a lot of spiritual blindness all around us, in our churches and indeed our nation.

There are several stories in the Gospel of Mark about people who were blind, and Jesus helped them. In one of them, though, it doesn't quite work. It's in Mark chapter 8, Jesus does his thing of spitting on some dirt and placing the paste on the man's eyes. But for some reason that day his spit wasn't quite up to its usual power, and the man says to Jesus: Yes, I can see. I can see people, but they look like trees walking around.

Now let me say I admire this guy for telling the truth, not pretending. This fits well in Mark's Gospel, where he shows that the 'disciples' are not super heroes of faith, but actually people who more often than not don't get it. I reckon if I was writing the story I'd try to make myself look at least a bit smarter, but they tell the truth. Mostly they don't quite get it.

And if Jesus half healed my blindness, I'd probably tell him all was sweet, I wouldn't want to offend him. But this blind man tells the truth, he can see a bit, but frankly it hasn't quite worked. Then Jesus touched his eyes again and he could see.



This story sits right in the middle of Mark's Gospel, and it says to me that the pathway of insight and discipleship is not about instant understanding and immediate results, but in fact it may take some time. And the people closest to Jesus are the ones who seem to be the most blind.

Mark's story of discipleship is one where they don't get it; they don't see or hear or understand, and in fact at the end they are sent right back to where it all started, to Galilee, so that they can go around again and maybe this time they will see. It's a continuous journey of learning to see.

Our university seeks to produce graduates with five attributes, or if you like habits of life and practice:

people who **learn**, from the great sources of our Christian Faith,
who **articulate** that learning, reflecting on how this all connects with life and the world around us,
And thus people who can **communicate** that insight, in meaningful ways;
Which leads to **engaging** with the world around us,
Serving, inviting the best, reaching out for the fullness of God's creation, justice, peace.

And you see all of this is actually a *vision*: it is a way of seeing ourselves and the world and God, all of it together—even though we can't see it all, even though at best it may look like trees walking around.

Our world desperately needs people of vision, people who are not just looking at how things are now, but with a hope and a vision for how things might be, could be and, in the providence of God, will be.

I do so hope that in your studies there have been such moments, those 'Ah Ha!' moments, when you glimpsed, even if only in part, this vision of how it all belongs in God, a vision of humanity and the creation healed and living in the peace and joy of God.

But to do that particularly requires something built into the second of our Graduate Attributes: *Articulation*.

It is not just about being articulate, expressing yourself well. It is much more about being able to make connections: to articulate things, to put things together, to reconcile what seemed to be opposites, to show what all this has to do with the reality of life, things around us.

Your challenge, in whatever form of ministry or life you have, is to articulate the wisdom you have been shown, to find the connections and then express them, in words, in engagement and service. This is how we can be ambassadors for Christ, agents of reconciliation. This is not always easy.

There was one student who said to her New Testament teacher, 'Professor, I could preach much better before I did your course.' What that actually meant was that she now knew that when she preaches, she has to take the text seriously, not just make it say what we'd like to it to say.



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And we need to work beyond the complications of our studies, to a simplicity, a clarity, that helps people to see the gems, the wisdom, the reality of God's presence amidst it all.

That doesn't mean being simplistic. To pretend that it is all simplistic, easy-peasy, is to rob people, young and old, and yourself, of all that your study has given you.

Your challenge, now, is to work for that articulation, and express it in creative and imaginative, inviting ways, that is what it means to see—and see again.

And when we find we can see some of that, we tell others and they too help us to see what they see, and we go on seeing, and discovering, more and more of the reality that is unfolding before us. People *and* trees!

I believe this nation is inviting us to say what we see: to offer **vision**. It's not a matter of telling people what to see. It's a matter of offering reflective, humble statements of what we see—even when we know it is only partial, like trees walking around.

So, I invite and urge you, our graduates, and you, our faculty, and all of us here, to consider what sight we have been given, and what helps we have been given to see, to see again, and to offer that to the rich tapestry of the community around us.

Reverend Associate Professor Frank Rees
University of Divinity
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ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Reverend Associate Professor Frank Rees
Chair of the Academic Board, University of Divinity

Reverend Associate Professor Frank Rees is an ordained Baptist minister and has served as Chair of the University of Divinity Academic Board since 2017.

Previously he was Principal of Whitley College, Melbourne, where he taught Systematic Theology since 1991. A graduate of the University, he now teaches as an adjunct lecturer at several colleges within the University and has research interests in theology as biography.

He leads an international study project on the lives of 'Baptist saints' and is co-chair of a dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the Roman Catholic Church.



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