



GRADUATION ADDRESS | Friday 07 February 2020

Service is no small thing

University of Divinity graduands aspire to:

1. **Learn:** *equipped for critical study, especially of Christian texts and traditions*
2. **Articulate:** *theological insight and reflection*
3. **Communicate:** *informed views through structured argument*
4. **Engage:** *with diverse views, contexts and traditions*
5. **Serve:** *Graduates are prepared for the service of others*

The fact that you sit here this evening is a testament to your successful commitment to learning, articulating, communicating, engaging and serving! Congratulations. Well done! No small thing!

How do we measure if we are indeed prepared for the service of others? It's one thing to complete our study, gown up and graduate but at the end of the day, as Christ followers, we're here to serve, I'm here to serve, and with this I have a slight dilemma.

I worry that my service is carried out with wrong motive.

You see I find myself becoming increasingly selfish as I get on in years: putting my own interests above others, my own comfort above others, my own desires or intentions above others. And so I am heading into 2020 with this heightened awareness of my tendency to be selfish and to perhaps serve out of a place of selfishness and a longing to overcome it. This vice was highlighted during the recent fires along the east coast. I wrote the following in my journal:

I want the fires to end.

I see the devastation of land, animal and human life; I see the fear of those in the midst of the crisis; I see the pictures, read the stories, hear the news. I wonder how long our firefighters can go on, how long resources can hold out, how long human hope can hold out.

The fires remind me that for every crisis that makes the news many more go unreported and many more suffer and mourn – earthquakes, floods, landslides, and the evil actions of humankind, so much not seen or heard.



*I want to pray and let others know I am praying and yet it feels so cliché, so useless.
I'm just sad that 2020 has begun this way and will be forever etched in our memories as the year of the terrible fires.*

Then of course there is the climate change debate! Oh, don't start me!

But here's the thing – I fear that my motive for all of the above is driven by complete and utter selfishness – I don't want to feel this way, I don't want to feel this discomfort, this dread, this sense of helplessness. I want to help only because I want it over. I want to wake up to good news...rain has come, the fire is over...but it's all selfishness...it's all I, I, I and I hate that!

And this is where I should wrap up with a word of hope, quote a scripture verse, a positive note to spur us on, but nope...these days are 'darker than night', so be it.

I'm sounding like the opening chapter of Ecclesiastes where everything is meaningless which brings us to our scriptural reading for this evening. Allow me to read it once again.

Ecclesiastes Chapter 3, verses 1-8, 11-13

We would be wise not to read these verses of Ecclesiastes in isolation. We discover that the book makes much more sense when read as a whole and in so doing it encourages us to see our lives not as fragments but in fact contributing to something far greater than our present circumstances may suggest.

This is the overarching message from the writer of Ecclesiastes. While life may appear meaningless (see the start of the book) what matters is that we fear God, keep God's commands and set out to build a life in God that transcends all the meaninglessness surrounding us.

A catalyst for building such a life stems from verse 11 – "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end." What sets you and I apart from the rest of creation is this deep deep awareness in our hearts, in our minds, of an 'eternal existence.' We know that there is a much bigger story beyond this moment, a bigger story in which you and I participate, a story with eternal purpose and yet cannot be fully known or understood. This is no small thing and I wonder what our service would look like, what my service would look like, if it was motivated by this knowledge of a much bigger story and less so by my own selfishness.

Hmmm, I think it looks a lot like Jesus and how he served.

- He called his disciples, taught them all he knew, loved them, washed their feet, fed them and they deserted him in his moment of deep distress.
- He healed, he cast out demons, he performed miracles – yet only a few said thanks and most cried 'crucify him.'
- He spoke a message of love and inclusion and forgiveness and yet he was hated, excluded and killed.



Jesus' service was driven by love and His knowing that the story was much bigger than present realities. He knew that eternity was set in human hearts. The church continues today even when those first disciples fled. A much bigger story.

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1. **Serve:** Graduates are prepared for the service of others

I asked at the start how we might measure this.

I humbly suggest that we can measure our service for others by acknowledging that there is indeed a bigger story, an eternal story to which we are part of even when current circumstances don't seem to show it; that we rise above any sense of meaninglessness (and in my case selfishness) by this knowledge and in our relationship with the Divine; that the seemingly smallness of our contribution, our service to another is actually contributing to the eternal story, to God's story. This is no small thing. And this is wonderful motivation for you and me to serve.

This is preparedness and should spur us on to serve, not out of selfishness, but out of hope; to tell others of this hope and to contribute to the bigger story, the eternal story, set in human hearts.

In my journaling I mentioned that I felt unable to offer any word of hope but this evening I have hope. This evening I want to leave you with this word of hope and inspire you to take all your learning, articulating, communicating, and engaging and go serve – go contribute to God's eternal story set in every human heart. Your service is no small thing!

The Lord bless you.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

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Major Deborah Robinson is the Corps Officer at The Salvation Army Corps in Perth, Western Australia.

A passionate Christian leader, Deborah is acknowledged within The Salvation Army as one who is committed to the empowerment and encouragement of others.

She is committed to the power of community and journeying together, as well as having a fervent desire to help people find the skills and knowledge they desire to make a difference in the world around them.

Deborah has held various leadership roles within the Salvation Army, with her most recently being Principal of Eva Burrows College. She is currently studying a Master of Leadership with Asbury Seminary in Kentucky, USA.



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