



## GRADUATION ADDRESS | Friday 19 March 2021

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Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Graduates, Families, Friends and Colleagues.

Last year's in-person graduation was cancelled. This year we have limited and socially distanced numbers. We can celebrate our good fortune or lament our loss. I encourage celebration! We are here, present and online. We lament the limits imposed on us. There is much to be grateful for! There is a great deal to celebrate: achievement and the greater good. We can view this celebration as a welcome drop of delight in the greater gloom. Or we can see it as an indicator of a richer reality.

St Paul, author of tonight's reading, encouraged his hearers to rejoice. He underlines his command. It's not a suggestion. It is a direction. Rejoice! I say it again. Rejoice! It would seem that Paul took the view that life lived to the full is a life of joy.

Let me first focus on the immediate occasion for our joy: YOU MADE IT! Congratulations! For those of you graduating for the first time, welcome to this new community! For those back for the second or umpteenth time, we appreciate your custom! Rejoice. Smile. Enjoy the moment. Celebrate your journey! I imagine that this has been a journey of discovery -- of new ideas, of insights, of engagement, of possibility.

The University's Graduate Attributes spell out this process as Learn, Articulate, Communicate, Engage and Serve. I am certain you have had opportunity in each of these spheres. Congratulations on what you have learned, achieved and become. I ask you, as the Cheshire Cat asks Alice in Wonderland, "Who are you?" Who have you become in your journey? What has your learning given you? What has your engagement drawn from you? To what service are you called? We change through life. Our studies accelerate and focus us. We are members of communities, called to engagement.

Tonight, we read a letter from prison, sent to a community. Paul does not ask his readers for mindless optimism, happiness for its own sake, or superficial cheer. He does not link his happiness to release or to better prison conditions. He does call for thankfulness. Prayerful thankfulness. Gratitude and gladness describe the community of faith for Paul. Joy is the command he gives -- not joy in circumstances or achievement, but joy in the Lord. As with mystics before and after him,



Paul issues a call based on the deepest substance of reality, the very character of God. Rejoice in the Lord!

You will have experienced many challenges in your studies. Tonight, you rejoice in your success and we rejoice with you. But what will it mean next year; next pandemic; next challenge; next opportunity? In prison; under torture; in pain? When there is "no friend but the mountains"? When it seems that the rock on which you have built is desolate and unyielding? When perhaps you wish that the ground of your being would swallow you up? Who are YOU in the light of The One. The crazy, humble, joyful yet crucified one. Jesus. Lord of the Dance, perhaps: yet suffering servant; pilgrim of sorrow -- Who for the joy set before him endured the cross and shame. Paul. The persecutor. Acting "beyond measure" in his zeal. Redirected. Redeployed. Advocate of joy. You. Your past, your present and all that is to come. Who are you? Who have you become? And who has helped you become the now more fully equipped you? Many remarkable, hidden ones. Many celebrate with you, visible and not so visible. Behind Jesus, Mary. The one who cried "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my saviour...." Paul's mum, of whom we know nothing directly. Though we know he was from a pious family from Tarsus, a renowned university town in his time. And that he was educated in best Jewish tradition. We know Paul affirms Timothy's mother Eunice and grandmother Lois as exemplars of faith. We are formed and sustained by our community. History affirms the roles of family in nurturing success, faith and joy. This was said of an early Christian leader and thinker, eclipsed by famous family: "She kept the family together through her sharp mind, devout soul and strong will, ultimately transforming her ancestral estate into a successful community of male and female ascetics." [Dawn LaValle Norman, "Wise women: 6 ancient female philosophers you should know about", The Conversation, 8 March 2021 (<https://theconversation.com/wise-women-6-ancient-female-philosophers-you-should-know-about-156033>)]. The oldest of ten in an expansive, influential, well-educated Christian family in Cappadocia, she was commemorated by her brother, Gregory of Nyssa, for her wisdom in his biography Life of Macrina and also in a philosophical dialogue On the Soul and Resurrection. This outlines a conversation about death as Macrina lay dying. In this she shows wide philosophical, scriptural and scientific knowledge.

The less visible and less well known are part of our story. In gratitude and gladness, we honour them. Joy offers us not only a place of delight and a place of reflection. Joy offers us a place of engagement. A place of gift. A gift of hope. I give thanks for two godly grandmothers who prayed for me from before my birth until they were in their nineties. The great, prayerful rejoicers. Those who pray; those who encourage, or perhaps those who, like the Samaritan woman and the Syrophenician woman, ask impertinent questions... Are you so great that you eclipse the prophets? Why on earth are you doing this study? Who do you think you are? Perhaps you have particular gratitude for your parent, partner, children, fellow student, friend.... We give thanks to our families and those who journey with us. I note my thanks to one who has helped shape me for this evening, my eldest daughter, Christy, who is one who missed out on last year's ceremony.

Do not forget the life changing lessons. Greek goes, Hebrew fades. But the Lord calls us to rejoice with a "defiant 'Nevertheless!'" In darkness we may have discovered illumination. Or perhaps in the light of study we have developed means of facing the darkness.



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Who are you? Who have you become? Whose are you? Each of us is a person loved and called to active joy-filled self-giving: "Service" and "Engagement" in our graduate attributes. It means putting oneself out there: Truly being the one you and you only were called to be. Who will we be? If we follow St Paul's call and command, we will be people rejoicing in the Lord. Not simply in what the Lord has done, nor what the Lord has done in us: We will rejoice in resonance with the very nature of God. It is our call. It is our destiny.

And what of who we will, as humankind, become? How might joy figure other than in a pious hope for eternity? Let me stimulate your thinking with some thoughts on how technology will shape human development, when brains can be uploaded to computers (making Zoom look a little dated!) or bodies kept going through endless creation of spare parts. Here is a thought from Australian theologian, Victoria Lorrimar:

"Questions surrounding human enhancement represent new opportunities for theologians to engage in cross-disciplinary reflection on many of the 'big questions', and to recover a place for God in public discourse. What is our purpose? What constitutes the good life? Do we determine our own destiny? A renewed focus on joy is central to all of these reflections." [Victoria Lorrimar, "Human Flourishing, Joy, and the Prospect of Radical Life Extension", ExpT 2018, 129(12) 560.]

Just as family are not on stage tonight, nor are the many who have worked behind the scenes. Those who manage enrolments, the recording of grades, the preparation of events like this, who will keep your records on file for decades. Whose names you probably do not know.

On your behalf, I thank and honour them. They rejoice with you tonight. They and your teachers and supervisors set the path and provide the means for our celebration.

Rejoice, my friends. In case you have forgotten, let me say it again, rejoice! In the darkness. In the light. Rejoice! In suffering. In flourishing. Rejoice! Tonight. Tomorrow. Rejoice. Once again. Rejoice.

Never forget in the darkness what you have learned in the light. Rejoice. Never forget in the light what you have discovered in the darkness. Rejoice!

The final section of our reading exhorts us: "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in (us) , and the God of peace will be with you." (Phil 4)

As we, your teachers, have sought to meet and exceed the standards set for us by our teachers, so may you surpass us. Rejoice in the Lord!

The God of peace will be with you.



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## ABOUT THE SPEAKER

### The Reverend Dr John Capper

The Reverend Dr John Mark Capper is an ordained Anglican theologian, educational leader. John is involved in organisational governance as well as in teaching and mentoring teachers in theological education. John served as Director of Learning and Teaching at the University of Divinity from 2013-2019 and is currently the Academic Dean at Stirling Theological College.

John's PhD from the University of Cambridge is in systematic theology, exploring Karl Barth's Theology of Joy. This built on five years of training evangelists with the Church Army in Australia. John developed his love of theology and its relevance for practical ministry in rural New South Wales, building on studies at Ridley College and through St Andrew's Hall. John began his professional life as a Chemical Engineer with Shell Refining in Sydney.

A teacher of theology, John has been an early adopter and innovator in using online educational tools, as well as using drama and movement in teaching. Described by more than one student as a "stand-up theologian", he seeks to engage students fully with each other, with the sources of theology and its traditions, and with God.

John is an active member and occasional preacher at Mullum Mullum Anglican Church and a Board Member of Tintern Grammar, his tenth school board. He has served on a number of Academic Boards in higher education and is a member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors, as well as professional bodies in the area of theology and theological education.



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