

GRADUATION ADDRESS | Reverend Dr Stephen Haar | Friday 2 December 2022

To all our graduates this evening—those attending in person and those participating by livestream—my personal and warm words of congratulation. Tonight, we celebrate with you, your families, and all those who have supported and encouraged you during your course of studies. Well done. You should be deservedly proud of your academic achievements and ready to take your next steps in life.

When you first enrolled for studies with the University of Divinity, we made a commitment to provide you with a learning community that would empower you to serve and lead, through an engagement with and learning from the great sources of Christian faith and its traditions. Tonight, your teachers say you are ready for your next steps in vocation and service. Yes, you are ready—but not finished yet. There is more to learn, more to live, more to love, more to serve ahead of you. So, I want to encourage you with this quirky piece of advice: as you continue a lifelong journey of learning, always remember the hats you have been given to wear.

Since receiving my Bachelor of Theology degree in 1978 (Yes, I really am that old!) I have worn many different hats, taken on various roles, and accepted a range of different responsibilities. The experiences and learning I enjoyed, through wearing those different hats, have contributed to whom I have become, and to whom I will be in the future. Tonight, I suggest, is a good time also for you to reflect on the learning and experience you have gained as a graduate from the University of Divinity.

I processed into this ceremony wearing the traditional Tudor Bonnet: a hat styled after the headgear of medieval scholars. It is thoroughly impractical and never worn outside of occasions such as this. Traditionally it symbolises advanced learning, curiosity, vision, and critical thinking. It is typically worn by people with research, professional, or higher-doctoral degrees. It may also be worn by a person who has been awarded an honorary doctorate.

Graduates who study coursework degrees typically wear a black cap during graduation ceremonies, commonly known as an oxford cap, trencher, or mortarboard. University of Divinity academic dress code, however, reserves these caps for graduates in postgraduate awards.

The mortarboard shares its name with a bricklayer's tool, however, don't worry or feel weird about wearing this hat—it has a totally different origin, a very religious origin. The initial design was based on Italian-style birettas—caps worn by Roman Catholic priests. Today the mortarboard is a worldwide symbol of educational achievement. It links those who wear this headgear to a community of scholarship that, since the time of the Renaissance, has played a crucial role in both the world and church through critical thinking, debate, evidence-based research, and publication of ideas. From that perspective, to wear your academic hat is a reminder of inspiring and life enriching things. In future years, you may never be required to wear your gown and hat to work. Yet, I trust the academic gown and caps you wear tonight will continue to serve as a reminder of the learning you have gained and the attributes you have demonstrated during your course of studies.

In tonight's scripture reading, there are words of counsel for you and your future vocation. The writer, Paul, identifies another hat you have been given to wear—in fact a whole wardrobe needed to meet future challenges, and to remain resilient in ministry '*Finally,*' Paul writes, '[from now on] *be made strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God.*'



Ancient cultures often spoke of human life in terms of warfare. For example, the Roman Stoics spoke of life as being like ‘military service’ in which there was a constant battle between reason and passions. The first-century Jewish philosopher Philo described human life as warfare against desires. Likewise, Paul urges Christians to ‘*Put on the whole armour of God.*’

In the words of Scripture, to put on another person’s clothing signals a change, or new source of empowerment, for the person being clothed. For example, in 2 Kings 2:13–15, Elijah’s mantle is taken up by Elisha, who is then said to have the power of Elijah. The book of Judges (6:34) records how the Spirit of the Lord clothed himself with Gideon to redeem Israel. The Gospel of Luke reports a post-resurrection command of Jesus to the disciples, ‘*Stay in the city until you have been clothed from on high*’ (Lk 24:49).

In Ephesians 6, Paul uses a common militaristic image of body armour that his audience would have seen on Roman soldiers daily, but in a nose-tweaking twist, he reinvents the image in a non-militaristic way. He names common parts of armour—belt, breastplate, shield—but assigns them uncommon values: truth, righteousness, faith. Consequently, military armour, usually a symbol of self-reliance, is transformed into a symbol of utter dependence. The armour of God is not for advancing or attacking a new enemy, but meant for defending, or reclaiming territory already won.

Having fastened on the belt of truth around your waist, Paul counsels, and having put on the breastplate of integrity, and having shod your feet with the gospel of peace, and having taken up the shield of faith, and having donned the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, stand your ground.

Christian ministry is more than human activity and the artful performance of skills. Christian ministry is rooted in the working of God in the world. Christians receive, as a gift from God, the same victory helmet worn by God (Isa 59:17). We are given a share in that victory and salvation, which is both a present possession (Eph 2:5,8) as well as a future hope (Eph 1:13,14). Daily we need to take the helmet of salvation: to refresh our mind and heart by listening to the word of God, to pray during all circumstances, and to remember who guarantees the ultimate victory.

The military imagery in Ephesians 6 has inspired countless hymn writers over the years; among them the traditional Irish hymn, ‘*Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart*’, which we sang as our procession hymn this evening. The third verse reads:

*Be thou my armour, my sword for the fight; be thou my dignity, thou my delight;
thou my soul’s shelter, and thou my high tower:
raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.*

In verses 18-20, Paul’s counsel shifts from using a military metaphor to the language of prayer. Prayer and constantly asking for God’s help are the primary ways people in ministry are to stand their ground—reliant on the power of the Spirit. ‘*Keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel.*

As you leave this community of learning, lift your eyes and keep your feet on the ground. You are ready for the next steps in service and ministry, but you are not finished learning yet. Paul wants you to remember, whenever you may be tempted to give in or give up: our everyday lives and daily struggles have cosmic significance. As we struggle, we are taking part in God’s great battle—the battle God has, ultimately, already won.



So, when you leave tonight, remember the hats you have been given to wear. Your academic hat, as a reminder of inspiring and life enriching things. And the helmet of salvation—being clothed with Christ—to protect your mind and heart as you live and work in a world threatened by brokenness, injustice, and the anxious fears these may bring. Hang on to both hats.

Thank you for the honour of addressing you and congratulations to the graduates of 2022.

Reverend Dr Stephen Haar, Doctor of Divinity (honoris causa) 2022

