

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, colleagues, supporting families and friends and, most importantly, esteemed graduates.

These are the unceded lands of the Kurna people. I thank God for their loving care of these lands, waterways and skies over millennia. I pay my respects to Elders past, present, emerging and other Indigenous Australian people who are here tonight. As we travel a journey of reconciliation in Australia let those of us who are non-Indigenous Australians be quick to hear, slow to an opinion, and slow to angrily react because our anger has nothing to do with what is right before God (James 1:19-20).

Tonight we celebrate quality theological learning. I, therefore, want to ask you, graduates, teachers, other staff, church leaders and support crews, this question: **Why did you do it?**

Graduates, tonight marks the culmination of what were likely to be years of intense theological study. You struggled, sacrificed, procrastinated, drafted, snarled, wept, persevered, broke through and succeeded. **Why did you do it?**

Teachers, tonight you celebrate your students' learning. You laboured with them. You kept silent when needed, provoked when it helped, corrected if necessary, and companioned at every opportunity. You know that good learning is grounded in good relationships and so you gave yourselves. **Why did you do it?**

Family and friends, you listened, acted interested, were interested, proofread, possibly financed, encouraged, and encouraged, and encouraged, and quietly punched the air when grades were given. **Why did you do it?**

College support staff. Your participation often goes unnoticed, **and yet you are here**. It's important. You documented, sorted, balanced, reported, attended, listened, advised and directed, performed miracles, worked countless voluntary hours and then with a satisfaction known only to yourselves, you quietly smile as students complete their programs and present themselves here tonight. **Why do you do it?**

Finally, denominational leaders and church members. You sent, entrusted, kept out of the way, pretended to know what an EFTSL is, funded, connected, gave in, and finally asked what an EFTSL is, and then received many of our graduates for vocational assignment. **Why do you do it?**

To all of you here tonight, why do you engage with theological learning? Are you glad that you do? Will you continue to do it? How?

As I consider my own responses to these questions, and as I reflect on leaving my own deeply loved learning community at ALC, I want to share what I have learned and value concerning good, transformative adult learning. I want to share the wisdom of pioneering social educators such as Freire, Mezirow, Wheatley and Frieze; underpinned by the work of solid social theorists such as Buber, Bourdieu, Derrida, Foucault, and Habermas who explore what it means to be me/us; here; now; and, where learning as diverse human phenomena enable that enquiry to enlighten, emancipate and empower learners as transformed and as transforming social agents.



That is what I want to do, but I'm not going to offer you any of that. I enjoy exploring learning theory, **but it's not why I do what I do**, and I don't think that it adequately values your own motivations for reaching tonight's celebration either. As much as we might want it to be (especially for those of us who crave mastery), I don't believe that theological learning is a human centred or derived project. This is not to deny that people are the astonishing beneficiaries of theological learning. Instead, I believe that theological learning arises from a transforming promise. It is a trustworthy and sustained promise made and kept by God, en-fleshed in the person of Jesus Christ, which leads people, like us, to make our own astonishing, transformative promises through vocational vows and heartfelt commitments to glorify God and serve the world and its people because of our learning. Theological learning is faith at work. We are here because God, in deeply personal ways, **calls us to hear** and to learn. Hearing, receptive hearing from God is how theological learning and teaching begins, and in hearing we are called to teach:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." (Deuteronomy 6:4 NRSV)

Teach this to your children (6:7).

In chapter 28 of Matthew's Gospel account the resurrected, exalted, triumphant, still fully en-fleshed Jesus Christ makes a preposterous promise to his followers. It is to always remain with them. Why? He didn't have to, and he still doesn't. He defeated death. He conquered the constraining, deathly, corrupt forces that are called sin. He won. He gets the prize. He gets to rule. Yet he chose and chooses; promises his own continuing humiliation: To remain; to be materially present because people matter. To remain with people so that they might hear and trust the one who speaks; the one who promises. In Matthew 28 this promise even includes people who remain so thoroughly committed to their own human projects that they hear and understand little concerning Jesus' promise. Faith unfolds as Christ Jesus is not only present, but as he patiently attends to the whole person he is with, completing his own project of life for you and for me. For us. It began with little more than hearing and trusting. **Faith in God through Jesus Christ is surely why each of us is here tonight.**

Such faith is not a human project. It is heard. It is God's promise and gift to people. Jesus said, "Baptise and teach". That's how we know that the promise, the faith and the complete life that it gives is for us and for our neighbour, and so I want to finish with a final consideration of Jesus' instruction to teach. Learning and its servant teaching are described in different ways throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. In the Hebrew, Shema that you heard earlier - the word that is used for teach, is derived from the repetitive, rhythmic action of sharpening a knife on a whetstone. The sharpening, however, is not the sum of learning. For a knife, the sharpening is brought to completion when the knife is purposefully and violently used to protect, assault, construct, harvest or eat. Only then to return to be resharpened. Such is the cycle of a knife's existence. Hearing, learning, teaching are also enacted for life. This image seems to justify imposing, rote, identity crushing approaches to learning. Approaches that drill learning content into empty, inadequate vessels. That, however, is not what the Shema proposes. Instead, learning is formed from right, loving relationships with God:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."

(Deuteronomy 6:5 NRSV)

Right relationships lead to good learning, and so learning is not just for your life. It is for our lives together, and it's for the lives of those among whom you will serve and continue to learn.



Without diminishing God's instruction to teach, Jesus, as teacher, transforms the violent, knife-like image of learning into a relational one. He filled a dish with water, wrapped a towel around his waist, knelt down and washed his disciples' feet, and then:

¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you?' ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. (John 13:12-14 NRSV)

With the Teacher, the knife becomes a bowl of water and a towel not to cut down but to welcome and make right. That's preposterous, and just when we think that we've mastered it the power-promising knife-like behaviour overtakes us again. Learning doesn't end.

The disciples heard what Jesus said, they acted, and you and I are here tonight. Theological learning, hearing God speak and seeing God act for us, is God's faith-forming promise in Jesus Christ being kept.

Graduates, why are you here tonight? Recognising the achievements of each and every one of you is important but a celebration such as this is not just about mastery and recognition. It's also about recognising endings so that you can follow Jesus' promises into your new beginnings. It's about seizing opportunities to live out your faith – the faith that brought you to study theology and the very same faith that will sustain you in the coming years as you serve others in Jesus' name. Faith is trust – trust that God calls you into a future that is already prepared for you and the people you serve. While celebrating your achievements matters – and I'm glad to be here tonight doing just that, ask yourselves why. You have been sharpened, and you are given towels and water bowls. What will you do with them? Framing them and hanging them on a wall will not be enough. As you leave here tonight and move towards whatever's next, trust the promise and all that you are learning from it, "I am always with you, to the end of the age." **Theological learning, your learning is that promise kept.**

Reverend James Winderlich

