

“Clothe yourselves with humility”

Chancellor, members of Council, staff, graduates, students and supporters: I thank you for the great honour the University of Divinity has accorded me tonight.

Graduates, it is my privilege to congratulate you on your achievements, and to offer you some words of encouragement as you begin to apply your learning for the benefit of others.

The reading from the First Letter to Peter we have heard this evening includes the exhortation to “clothe yourselves with humility”. This is uncomfortable enough in the context of a traditional church service, let alone a Graduation Ceremony when you and I are wearing academic regalia that are symbols of knowledge, status and power. So, as I wear this magnificent Vice-Chancellor’s gown one last time, I would like to offer you some reflections on humility.

I like to think I know a bit about humility. When I finished primary school with outstanding academic results and front and centre roles in the school musical, my mother wisely gave me a plaque which read “It is hard to be humble when you are as great as I am”.

Years later when I was reading for my doctorate at Oxford University, I discovered there was an annual University Sermon endowed in 1684 on the topic the “Grace of Humility”. I could think of no more hilarious ambition in life than to aspire to be the preacher of an Oxford sermon on the “Grace of Humility”.

Today I am a little wiser and, I trust, a little humbler. I used to think humility meant being quiet, putting yourself down, allowing others to have their way, refusing to exercise power, rejecting the praise of others. I now realise that true humility is not about what you do or what you say – or even about what you wear. It is indeed a grace, a gift, a disposition, a way of life.

True humility includes accepting the authority of the elders and placing ourselves under the mighty hand of the Creator. These are truths our society would do well to observe, drawing on the living traditions of Christian wisdom and the cultural practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies, traditions that require attention to the wisdom of the elders.

For in humble obedience lies great strength – I, you, can set aside the foolish pride that makes me think I have to solve all the problems, that only I can carry all the burdens. To be truly humble is to rejoice in our mutual dependence.

Graduates, many of you are called in God’s good time to become elders, whether as priests or pastors, bishops or CEOs, community leaders or activists, supervisors or counsellors, teachers or healers. True humility requires us to recognise then respond to the call to eldership with confidence and self-awareness. True humility means exercising our authority with respect for each other and for the common good.

These are the reasons why we hold Graduation ceremonies, dress up in academic robes, and give you a testamur, a beautiful certificate to help you remember your achievements.

We do these things to clothe you with true humility. We want you to recognise who you are becoming. We want you to have the courage to live out your God-given vocation. We want to remind you as graduates that you are part of a community, a University, that will carry the load with you.



I like to think these ideas are captured in our University logo, printed on your programs. The logo is a gold star, that shines brightly – as the Letter to the Philippians puts it, “Shine like stars in the sky”! You’ll find the logo embossed on your testamurs as a way of telling you we think each of you is a star. This star, however, is made up of many parts, many books. Each book is beautiful on its own, but they only shine like a star when arranged together in a circle. Meanwhile the presence of the red book reminds us of the passion, sacrifice and courage required to complete your studies, to live out your vocations.

At this point in human history, each of you will need true humility, self-recognition, the wisdom of the elders, and the discipline of courage. For “like a roaring lion your adversary the devil” indeed is prowling “around, looking for someone to devour”. War, pandemic, climate change, the decline of Christian faith in the west, the legacy of colonialism and slavery, the unjust discrimination within both church and society, the harm we cause to each other, the unravelling of democracy itself – these are tough times.

In a moment such as this, theology matters as much as it ever has. For, uniquely:

theology teaches us to think outside the box

theology makes us recognise the unspoken values and paradigms that underpin our behaviours

theology requires the grace of humility to recognise there is a better way

theology endows us with courage to turn ourselves and our world towards that brighter destination.

Graduates, my hope for you tonight is that

together

with humility and courage

you may know yourselves and your calling

you may take your theological learning into the diverse communities you serve

you may be a channel of restoration wherever there is injustice

you may be a source of strength wherever there is suffering

As I conclude my service as your Vice-Chancellor, my prayer for you – the staff, supporters, students and graduates of this University of Divinity – my prayer is that you may all be clothed with humility and disciplined in courage.

May you shine like stars in the sky, and may the Lord bless you and keep you.

Emeritus Professor Peter Sherlock

