

Here we are, gathered together in the chapel of Wollaston Theological College on an auspicious day, Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> April. The same day that some 1715 years ago the Emperor Galerius issued the Edict of toleration, marking an end to the persecution of Christians in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. It is also the day 121 years ago that one Albert Einstein completed his doctoral thesis at the University of Zurich. To me, what now adds to the historic significance of April 30<sup>th</sup> is that we are here to celebrate the achievements of the eleven graduating students. As I sat and watched you receive your testamurs, be acknowledged by your peers, your friends and your family, the privilege of being able to experience first-hand the sense of celebration and success is a heartening and humbling moment in time.

Archbishop Kay Goldsworthy, Chancellor, Dr Graeme Blackman, members of the Board of Wollaston Theological College, academic staff and other members of the UD community in attendance, and, most important of all, you, the graduates, and your family and friends gathered, it is my distinct pleasure to offer a few words of thanks for what has been achieved and encouragement for whatever may lie ahead.

When you looked through the graduation ceremony booklet, no doubt you each saw your name listed. The eleven names reflect the rich tapestry of the university community. You represent four of the twelve colleges, in turn also four of the seven denominations within the university and awards that range from undergraduate through to master's level. It speaks of the rich diversity of denominations and locations within the university – listed today are Australian Lutheran College, Eva Burrows College, Wollaston Theological College, and Yarra Theological Union. As graduates, you are an integral part of a distinctive institution, not only here in Australia but across the globe – a collegiate, ecumenical university. You represent a tangible expression of what can be achieved through diversity in a shared commitment, “to address issues from a sound and reasoned theological viewpoint and to offer society opportunities for dialogue with traditions and values that have been refined over centuries” [University of Divinity Act 1910]. I add an annotation, ‘and will continue to be refined...’. So, please look around, take in this moment and acknowledge each other's success.

I will take the opportunity briefly to focus our attention on the presiding officer of this ceremony, the Chancellor, Dr Graeme Blackman, AO (yes, the person that shook your hand as you received your testamur). As the inaugural Chancellor of the University, Graeme has diligently served in that role since the beginning of 2012, now for fifteen years. At the end of this year, which marks the end of his fifth consecutive term, Graeme will be stepping down from the role of Chancellor. This graduation marks the last occasion he will preside at a ceremony. To say Graeme is well versed in that task is an understatement. Today marks his 32<sup>nd</sup> graduation ceremony as Chancellor and in the time that Graeme has conferred over 5600 awards and has personally signed every testamur. On behalf of all those people that have received awards, and the university community at large, I offer my thanks to the open and engaging way you have helped to ensure the personal achievement of each graduate is warmly celebrated.



To the graduates, this ceremony is a formal acknowledgement of the conclusion of your studies. As you reflect on what you have achieved, I trust it is reason to be thankful and to be proud. To undertake formal study, to be challenged, to be tested, and to see it through to the end, requires trust, confidence, and dedication. I encourage you to see this conclusion also as a beginning, and as a beginning to where and to what is not necessarily known or necessarily expected. As I am sure you all know, life can take many unexpected turns, some because of circumstances beyond our control to which we must respond, and some because of choices we make as opportunities arise.

Let me explain with a brief personal reflection. Today I am located on the stage and am now standing here speaking to you. Several decades ago, I was in your position, sitting among fellow graduates, having my name called out, walking across the stage, and shaking the hand of the Chancellor. I had plans and hopes about what lay ahead. I was going to be an academic. I even aspired to the idea that one day I might eventually be able to become good enough that I could be a professor. But never, and I do mean never, did I think for a moment that I would 'join the dark side' and find myself undertaking positions of academic administrative leadership. And, even once I did find myself in that space, there was absolutely no point in time that I thought to myself, 'I want to be a Vice-Chancellor,' let alone that I might be one. I can assure you, the James McLaren whose name was called out as he walked up to shake the hand of the Chancellor had no idea that he would be one and the same person standing here today wearing the robes of a Vice-Chancellor. As I look back and consider how it is that I have found myself to be standing here before you today, much of that reflection focuses on responding to unexpected circumstances. At the same time, I am acutely conscious of how much of what has transpired for me is directly connected with what I learnt through my tertiary studies. They are like a well that keeps on giving, although formally ending some forty years ago, they have provided a constant companion through my career.

I keep six honest serving-folk  
(They taught me all I knew);  
Their names are What and Why and When  
And How and Where and Who.  
I send them over land and sea,  
I send them east and west;  
But after they have worked for me,  
I give them all a rest.

These lines from Rudyard Kipling's poem, *Asking Questions*, in his *Just so Stories* (1902) encapsulate the sense of that constant companion my studies undertaken at university have been for me, the critical skills developed round the importance of always asking questions. The reading from Paul's first letter to the community at Thessalonica also points to the role of always questioning. I claim no expertise in the study of Paul, so my apologies to any gathered here today that are such specialists for what I am about to say. Of all Paul's extant letters, I find this one, generally agreed to be his oldest surviving letter, to be particularly fascinating. I think it captures Paul's passion and sense of urgency that helps explain his unrelenting zeal to share the gospel beyond the reaches of Judea and Galilee. He appeals to the community to be a source of good. What I draw your attention to is that he does so by encouraging a mindset of questioning – to "test everything." So, as you all celebrate



this particular end point, I also encourage you to value the critical skills you have developed under the careful guidance of your lecturers and tutors as companions. Your successful completion of the award is testimony to your commitment to engaging in genuine dialogue. So much of the public domain is dominated now by polarization and entrenched views, echo chambers of likeminded people that foster fear and even disdain for the 'other' and act as enablers of hate speech and hate action. In distinct contrast, your course of study demonstrated your openness to enter into a dialogue with the Christian faith. The trust, the curiosity and the learnings, about yourself, about the faith tradition and about how others engage with that rich heritage of belief and practice is now a vital resource. You have modelled the importance of listening, the ability to reflect, to be open to other experiences, to ask questions, and to address difficult subject matter. Your time as a student is a story of risk, courage, trust and empowerment. You are voices for good, and above all, you are a source of hope.

As I conclude, I reiterate my encouragement for you to see this formal graduation ceremony as the beginning. What the next part in the story entails as you apply your learnings, whether it be in professional, community, and/or personal settings, is where the sense of anticipation, and excitement lies. You are now well equipped to adopt the mindset to "test everything" and that is reason for renewed hope. Thank you for being part of the University of Divinity community and godspeed with all that lies ahead.

