

Bible passage Mark 6.30-44

It has now been weeks or months since you completed your research project, passed your last exam, submitted your final essay, or edited the final version of your thesis according to the examiners' perfectionist requirements. Perhaps at that moment you breathed a sigh or a prayer of relief. Perhaps you have since felt a twinge of nostalgia for the days when being a student was your primary vocation, and many people – lecturers, supervisors, deans of studies, librarians, tutors – people took an interest in your learning journey. Or maybe you never want to write another footnote, but instead you are throwing yourself into the work for which your studies were supposed to prepare you: the pastoral practice, the theological reflection on experience, the biblical preaching, the teaching of the faith that you now know much more deeply than you did, the life of prayer, the day-to-day reality of ministry where all the disciplines collide and strike sparks in your soul.

Today, though, is the day for robes and gowns and certificates, for photo opportunities with your long-suffering supporters and your encouraging mentors. Today is the day for handshakes and bows, for the academic ritual that marks a life transition. Today is a landmark day on the journey not just from ignorance to knowledge, but more importantly from simplicity to wisdom.

Today is not a transition, however, from being a student to not being a student. We are all called to be life-long learners. Whether or not you ever again work through a bibliography, please do keep reading!

In a nod to an academic version of the apostolic tradition, here is a word of wisdom I would like to pass on from my own long-ago graduation ceremony as Bachelor of Divinity. The speaker was the late, great New Testament scholar, Dr Davis McCaughey AC, who was subsequently Governor of Victoria. He taught me almost everything I know about the Letter to the Galatians. He was not a fan of popular paperback theology. He told us that, when we bought a book, we should save up until we could afford a big one. It was and is good advice. Just because no one is prescribing your reading from now on, don't stop reading; and do read things that are going to take more than ten minutes on your screen!

My own journey with life-long learning has led me from that undergraduate grappling with Galatians and more, to wrangling with women's ordination in the Anglican Church, to refreshing the repertoire of liturgical text, both sung and spoken, in my part of the world of worship. You may have written and spoken hundreds of thousands of words over your academic journey; and the words do matter. Whether we are writing, singing, praying or preaching, our words matter.

Our words need to be true, because we owe God nothing less. Our words need to be as few as possible, because waffle and fluff are neither attractive nor convincing. Our words need to be as new as possible. It's not enough just to rehearse clichés or parrot safe but stale doctrinal formulas, because we have a responsibility to add to the treasure-houses of the traditions that have formed us. And our words need to be as beautiful as we can make them, because beauty is memorable, and beauty and truth belong together. So whenever you write, speak, sing or pray from today onwards, let your words be true, few, new, and beautiful.



I will now venture to add a few words about the reading we have just heard from Mark's gospel. You may be the judges of whether I meet my own criteria for true, few, new, and beautiful on this occasion!

Liturgical tid-bit: Lectionary users, you won't have heard this whole passage on Sundays in Mark's year of the three-year cycle, because in year B we flip from the teaching moment to John's extended bread-of-life version of the feeding. But doesn't Mark give us a ripping yarn! So please do keep on reading widely, as well as deeply, in your chosen disciplines.

Biblical Greek nugget: Mark really does say that the loaves and fishes fed five thousand men, as in blokes; but Matthew adds a throwaway line about the others who were presumed to be there: "five thousand men, besides women and children." Anyone for the feeding of the fifteen thousand? So please do practise an expansive, inclusive, generous version of your theological explorations.

Theological talking point: the teaching and the feeding go together. Shepherding – known in academic and church circles as pastoral care – shepherding, as Jesus does it, involves feeding the mind as well as feeding the body. Call it word and sacrament, call it proclamation and service, what you will; but please do offer these two abundantly, and in balance.

Ministry wellbeing moment: you're not the first disciples, and you won't be the last, to have "no leisure even to eat" – difficulty balancing your workload with your rest time. Intrusions happen. People with an agenda will keep rocking up, even at meal times. So hear what Jesus says to his mates: "Rest a bit." Please do take that as a dominical commandment, right up there with "go and preach the gospel to all nations." Jesus will provide for the needy and the greedy, when you can't satisfy them all.

Finally, a doxological moment. To echo Davis McCaughey, I say: when you ask for a blessing, ask for a big one. So here is a blessing for theology graduates.

A blessing for theology graduates

God bless you
with an unquenchable thirst for truth,
and delightful refreshment as you search for it.

God bless you
with clarity about the gifts that the Spirit is giving you,
and diligence in using them for the good of Christ's people.

God bless you
with knowledge, both hard-won and graciously shared,
and an invitation to sit at Wisdom's table in good company.

God bless you
with humility and joy in learning,
eloquence and patience in teaching,
and courage and compassion in loving,
now and for ever. Amen.

