

Sermon
by the Chaplain of St Mark's College, Adelaide,
Rev'd Grant Moore,
at the College Commencement Service,
St Peter's Cathedral, Adelaide,
Friday 28 February 2020

In the name of God: Creating, Redeeming, and Sanctifying. Amen.

Last night's quiz was great, even if it was a little disturbing to see so many Borat clones in one place. That was offset, of course, by the delightfully-attired *High School Musical*, although who was Troy, or Gabriella, or Sharpay, or Ryan ... I had no idea.

It reminded me of a quiz night our church ran a few years ago ... also one with a twist! Before launching into the questions, the quizmaster wanted to know ... were we smart thinkers? So he began with this. "While I was walking across a bridge I saw a boat full of people. Yet on the boat there wasn't a single person. Why?"

We were stumped. Eventually the quizmaster said, "The reason there wasn't a single person on the boat, is ... they were all married." There were other, equally lame teasers [*most of which I didn't get*], before he finished with this: "Can a man marry his widow's sister? Can .. a .. man .. marry .. his .. widow's .. sister?" Someone, clearly a smart thinker, shouted out, "No! Of course not! If a man's got a widow, he can't marry anyone, he's deceased!"

Whether that qualifies as smart thinking, I'm not sure. Truly smart thinking [*or analytical .. or critical .. or logical thinking – call it what you will*], involves more than the ability to see through semantic sleights-of-hand. It's actually an extremely comprehensive and arduously acquired skill-set, an essential one for uni students. As well as helping you develop your own rigorous sense of logic, it can enable you to recognise things you'd previously glossed over ... fallacious assumptions, hidden bias, ingrained prejudice, subtle nuance ... it can even help you nail fake news ... or tell when someone's being overly woke. Such a life enhancer!

But not only can smart thinking enhance your life – you never know when it might even save it. Consider this example [*one for the history buffs*].

King Louis the Eleventh of France [*known as the Spider King because he was always spinning webs of intrigue*] ... Louis was a superstitious man who surrounded himself with astrologers. At some point his favourite displeased him, and he decided to have him killed. Not, however, in a blatantly obvious manner. So Louis summoned him to a meeting – in a high tower – the idea being that at a signal his guards would usher the man to the edge and force him to jump.

As the unfortunate astrologer mounted the staircase, he recognised, only too well, the trademark signs of a royal plot. He realised he was doomed - only minutes from an untimely death. What to do?

Arriving in the king's presence, he was greeted cordially. But ever superstitious, and not averse to toying with a victim, Louis couldn't resist a question before giving the fatal signal. "Tell me, my friend,

you claim to know the future. What will be the day of my death?" Calm, and perfectly straight-faced, the astrologer replied, "You will die, Your Majesty, three days after me."

Not only was the signal never given, but Louis ordered that the would-be victim receive the best of food, lodgings and medical treatment for the rest of his life. Ironically, he outlived Louis by five years. Smart thinking? Absolutely! Not only life-saving, but life-enhancing.

In the Gospel account read to us by Dr Buxton, a very similar situation confronted Jesus. The question was a set-up, a trap! Imperial taxes were bitterly resented in ancient Israel under Roman occupation. If Jesus were to oppose paying taxes, the Romans would arrest him for sedition. Agree and his popularity with the masses would evaporate overnight. Surely, thought Jesus' opponents [*who'd been gunning for him for some time*] ... surely he is toast!

But Jesus' answer was one for the ages. "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Win win! Everyone's happy! Except, of course, the murderous opponents.

But not all of Jesus' smart thinking is so transparent ... understanding it requires the willingness to dig deeper [*a vital component of smart thinking*]. Consider Jesus' teaching on loving your enemies. "When someone hits you on the right cheek," he told his disciples, "turn the other cheek as well." Was he saying, as it's so often assumed, be submissive, let your enemy walk all over you?

Not really! In the contemporary culture, a backhander to the right cheek was a put-down to someone of lesser status. Turning the other cheek was a roundabout way of asking to be treated as an equal. In effect, Jesus was saying, "Sure! You might take another hit, but what's more likely is your enemy will be unwilling to double the insult. In fact, he may be so taken aback that he'll be forced to reconsider his action."

By doing this, Jesus' disciples would not be responding with tit-for-tat violence [*which usually begets further violence*], nor would they be meekly submissive [*which tends to encourage the perpetrator*]. Instead, by showing a bit of courage, they'd be giving the offender a chance to change his behaviour ... even improve his life. That's loving your enemy!

How such advice translates to the cyber age, learning, for example, how to deal with internet trolls, is something which undoubtedly requires some very smart thinking. But you know ... learning how to think smart, think critically ... you can hardly be better placed. Or in better company! Our staff leadership team, Professor Markwell, Professor Tregear, and Doctor Buxton, have all soared into the academic stratosphere in their chosen fields ... and not by chance ... being critical thinkers has been critical to their success.

And I'm sure they can tell you, smart or critical thinking is not an innate quality. It's a skill set we develop. A lifetime project ... one which requires us to put in the hard yards. Because without them you might find yourself in the following, unenviable position.

Four college students were out partying into the early hours. So late they slept in the next morning and missed an important test. Together they hatched what they thought was a rather smart plan. They went to their Professor and said they'd gone to a wedding in the country but on the way back a car tyre had burst and they'd been stranded.

The Professor thought for a minute and said, "Ok, you can sit a substitute paper. Go to separate cubicles and I'll bring it to you shortly." To the students' surprise, when they opened the paper, there

were only two questions. The first, for one mark, simply asked for their name. The second, for 99 marks, said, “ Which tyre burst?”

Louis the Eleventh couldn't outsmart his astrologer and you shouldn't expect to outsmart your professors. But you can certainly learn from them. And, I might add, from Jesus. Not only can the Lord Jesus Christ enhance your life, he can also save it. So ... to finish ... I ask ... can a smart thinker afford to neglect the radical, counterintuitive, there's more-to-life-than-meets-the-eye logic of Jesus? I wouldn't be your chaplain if I thought so.

May you all enjoy a year of truly smart thinking.

Amen.