

“Commencement Address”
by the Head of College, Professor Don Markwell, for the
Commencement Service for St Mark’s College
St Peter’s Cathedral, Adelaide
Saturday 27 February 2021

Thank you so much, Elinor, for that beautiful piece.

Today’s service to mark the commencement of the 2021 academic year at St Mark’s brings to mind themes on which it is good for us each to reflect as we start the new academic year – and for many here today, as you commence your university studies.

The Chaplain has spoken of the importance of seeking wisdom. How true is that.

I would like to encourage you to reflect on something I think is part of wisdom, and that is being clear about your values and living your values as best you can each day.

Our opening prayer today said that – I quote:

“We recognise that our attitudes, words and actions reflect ... the values we hold dear.

Grant, we pray, values which will enable us to live each day in truth and love...”

In short, our actions reflect our values, and we should aspire to the noblest of values.

The College hymn underlines this point when it says:

“... may we all our days pursue
the good, the beautiful, the true.”

This emphasis on values and this aspiration to noble values is at the heart of what St Mark’s College is about.

Nine days ago, at the Admission Ceremony, our new students signed the Roll of Members that new members of this College have signed since 1925. In doing so, they were signing a declaration that they “agree to be bound by, and obey honourably, the *values*, guidelines and rules of the College”.

In preparation for this morning’s Fresher Exam, all our new students have been doing something of necessity which our returning students do for sheer pleasure – studying the College Handbook.

One of the questions in the Fresher Exam asked how many times the word “values” appears in the College Handbook. Hearty congratulations to the one new student who gave the

correct answer! I can now give everyone the answer, because I've done a word search. The answer is that the word "values" appears in the Handbook no fewer than 61 times.

In its 61 references to "values", the Handbook states repeatedly that St Mark's is a values-based community. It contains several statements of our values.

It says that the role of members of the Senior Common Room, and specifically the Dean and Assistant Deans, and other leaders such as RAs and members of the College Committee are entrusted with upholding the values of the College.

The Charitable Foundation is rightly described as reflecting the strong commitment of St Mark's students to community service, which has been central to the College's values since our foundation.

This emphasis on values keeps recurring.

The College's Code of Conduct bases itself on values, and it and other policies declare that all members of the College are expected to act in accordance with the values of the College. Behaving significantly at variance with our values is described as choosing to exclude yourself from our community because you choose not to live according to our values.

The idea of St Mark's as a values-based community is deeply embedded in all we say about ourselves.

So what are our values?

This afternoon's service gives us many clues, including as we sang the College hymn and prayed the College prayer, with their reminders to us of the vision and values which shaped the founding of the College nearly 100 years ago, and which guide us still.

As the College Handbook says: "The College prayer and hymn express ... the values for which the College stands as an academic institution which promotes service to others."

There is, of course, more to our values than that. We have various documents which contain longer lists of values, but it seems to me that at their core is that we *are* an academic institution – an academic community - which does promote service to others, and that our values emphasise

- living with integrity and with consideration and respect for others,
- pursuing academic excellence, and
- serving others both here and in the wider community.

These are the values we declare - the values to which we say we aspire.

But are they the values we actually live?

Remember how our opening prayer today reminds us that our actions reveal what our real values are.

What do our actions reveal about what our real values are?

Maybe I'm biased, because I so much like and am impressed by the students of this College, but I think there's a lot of good news.

We *are* pursuing academic excellence, and by any objective measure achieving it – and this in a context of what was a tough year last year for university students, as it was for students in year 12 and on gap years. I think you can be very proud of what you achieved. And as well as doing well academically, we did extremely well in sport, and in a wide range of artistic and other activities, including activities of students helping others.

This reflects the fact that we *are* serving others, both within the College and in the wider community – in countless ways, including through the Charitable Foundation.

And we *are*, in the main, living with integrity and with consideration and respect for others.

But do our actions sometimes reveal that we do not always live up fully to our declared values? Do we always live our values as well as we should?

For example, twice in this service we pray that we may be – I quote - “a welcoming, inclusive and safe community”. Do all our actions – every day, and every night – reflect that as well as they should? Can we do better?

Do all our actions – every day, and every night – truly reflect our commitment to respect and dignity for all, regardless of gender or race or other attribute? Can we do better?

This is something for each of us to consider as individuals, and for us as a community to consider together – and, where we need to, to mend our ways.

To have the opportunity to live in an academic community which promotes respect and consideration for others, and service to others, as among its core values is something for which we should be very grateful.

If today's service reminds us about the importance of our values, it also points us to the importance of gratitude.

Our opening prayer, for example, gives “thanks for the beginning of this academic year, 2021”, and we give thanks to God at various points through the service.

One of the ways of expressing gratitude is through praise - expressions of appreciation.

Have you noticed how often the word “praise” is used in this service? I've done a word search on this too, and the answer is 35 times.

So the College hymn begins with our praise to those who built the College – an expression of gratitude.

The College prayer praises God “for the heritage into which we have entered in this College of St Mark” – an expression of gratitude.

The beautiful song which the Choir led us in singing, “Morning Has Broken”, praises God – gives thanks to God – for the creation and the re-creation of each new day. This too is an expression of gratitude.

Many psychologists studying wellbeing tell us that one of the best things we can do to promote our own wellbeing is to express gratitude – to focus on the things for which to be grateful in each day and in our lives generally, and to express that gratitude, including through writing letters or other messages of thanks.

Thanking others – our friends; our parents; our teachers; our cleaners; Josie, Grace and Matt; the donors of our scholarships, whoever it may be – is good for them and good for our own wellbeing.

We at St Mark’s have much for which to be thankful.

Whether it seems this way or not at this moment, for many people here today – perhaps for everyone - coming to St Mark’s is truly a life-changing opportunity. That is, of course, what it exists to be.

In giving thanks for our founders and for the benefactors of the College who have given us this opportunity, our College hymn asks that their qualities of “generous spirit, vision clear, and patient labours” will be “revealed in us continually”.

Out of our gratitude for the opportunity which St Mark’s gives us should grow a commitment to hand on that opportunity even better to those who come after us.

The St Mark’s tradition of giving back and creating opportunities for future generations is one expression both of gratitude and of our value of service to others.

Today we embark on the start of a new academic year, and for many, the start of university and College life.

I hope that the year ahead will be for you an important chapter in what the Chaplain rightly described as the life-long pursuit of wisdom, in which you will seek to live each day the noble values for which the College stands – and, as our College hymn says,

“all [your] days pursue
the good, the beautiful, the true.”