

“Commencement Address”
by the Head of College, Professor Don Markwell AM, for the
Commencement Service for St Mark’s College
St Peter’s Cathedral, Adelaide
Saturday 25 February 2023

As all of our students know well, the College Club Committee’s theme for the Welcome Week now coming to an end has been Top Gun: Maverick, based on the Tom Cruise action movie of last year. If you haven’t seen it, you can – as I did last weekend – still watch it on Foxtel Go.

The movie shows Tom Cruise – Maverick – the ageing naval pilot who is still “the fastest man on earth” train a team of younger, sometimes over-confident pilots to achieve a miraculous hit on an enemy installation and, against all the odds, come out alive.

The Welcome Week T-shirts featured a line from the movie – it’s the pilot, not the plane. It is, above all, the quality of the pilot that determines success or failure.

The movie shows that it is the skills, the knowledge, the character, the determination, the resilience, and also the training, the preparation, the teamwork, and the leadership that determine success.

As we embark on a new academic year, with university classes starting on Monday, it is good for each of us to ask ourselves – what kind of pilot will I be? What kind of person do I want to become?

Your university course will equip you with knowledge and with skills – knowledge and skills that are important for your life and career to come - and the College will do everything we can to support you in achieving your potential in that.

But the College will do more than that. As well as providing you with the best environment we can for your studies, we will also provide an environment in which you will be challenged and supported to be the best person you can be – ideally with qualities of character, resilience, teamwork, and even leadership that will help you throughout your life.

During Maverick’s training of his team, he is disciplined by his superiors for having the younger pilots he is training fly dangerously low. He is asked: “what exactly do you suppose you were teaching out there?”

He replies: “That as good as you are, you still have something to learn.”

That as good as you are, you still have something to learn. We all still have things to learn.

One of the things that many of us still have much to learn about is ourselves. Being self-aware – becoming aware of our own strengths and weaknesses; our own character strengths, our own character flaws, and the self-awareness and self-care we need; coming to understand our own passions, what motivates us, what stresses us, what leads us astray, and what to do about it – all this understanding of ourselves can be very important to becoming our best selves and to making the most of the opportunities we have.

One part of understanding ourselves is understanding what our values are. The prayer with which the Chaplain opened today's service says something very interesting. It says:

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

Our attitudes, words and actions reflect the values we hold dear.

Our new students had a helpful reminder of the importance of values in the so-called Fresher Exam this morning, when one of the questions read: "How many times does the word 'values' appear in the St Mark's College Handbook?" The answer, incidentally, is 89 times. 89 times.

Truly we aspire to be a *values-based* residential academic community. If the reality sometimes falls short of the aspiration, we shouldn't give up on the aspiration – we should think about how better to narrow the gap between reality and aspiration, and how to learn from our mistakes.

Many good people spend their whole lives trying to live up to the aspirational values in which they believe, including learning from their own mistakes.

So what are our values? What are your values?

This Commencement Service provides many clues to some good values. The College prayer which we just prayed, and the College hymn which our Choir will soon sing, both reflect values, as do the readings and other prayers in this service.

The first reading, read by the Director of Learning, Dr Katrina Stats, spoke of leading "blameless lives" and doing "what is right, speaking the truth from sincere hearts". That reading praised "those who refuse to gossip or harm their neighbours". There are lessons for us here.

The second reading, read by the College Club President, Ben "Maverick" McCure, went even further:

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. ... hold fast to what is good... live in harmony with one another."

Learning to live in harmony with one another is at the heart of what College life requires.

The Assistant Deans, Cam and Ella, read prayers which began:

"Gracious Lord,
grant us the strength of purpose to live together in harmony,
to create and maintain a welcoming, inclusive and safe community,
upholding the values for which we stand..."

Upholding the values for which we stand.

Over the last several months, the Assistant Deans have also done something remarkable – they have worked with other student leaders in drafting a superb statement of values known as the "St Mark's Collegians' Living Document of Values".

Initiated by student leaders at a retreat last July, fleshed out in lively discussion in the student leadership training last September, drafted by student leaders over the summer with every returner invited to contribute, this Living Document of Values was just yesterday and today signed by almost every student who has, in the words of the pledge they made, committed “to seeking to uphold and live out these values in our time at St Mark’s and beyond”. The small number of students who have not yet pledged to uphold the Living Document of Values will no doubt do so in coming days.

The core values which our student leaders identified, and which every student is expected to “uphold and live out” are: integrity, collegiality, respect, growth, and generosity.

The Living Document fleshes out what each of these means. For example, the section on “growth” begins:

“At St Mark’s College we have a unique opportunity to grow, flourish and thrive. As Collegians, pursuing intellectual growth is central to our purpose as university students, and a primary reason we reside at St Mark’s College. College is special in its diversity, and is an accepting environment which provides the opportunity for personal development and exploration.”

There then follow nine examples of what “growth at College looks like”, such as

- “having discipline to pursue success within our university studies”
- “being curious to pursue interests, to grow as a person by exploring new opportunities, and to find passions or a purpose which drives your motivation”, and
- “maintaining and practising a healthy lifestyle and positive wellbeing by practising self-care and utilising College support and facilities”.

The section on Respect says that: “We understand that showing respect in all our actions is essential to maintaining a positive and harmonious College environment.” Indeed it is, and here too we must learn from our mistakes.

This Living Document of Values – initiated, written, and signed by students – sets for us all a great model for College life in 2023 and beyond.

The 2023 academic year begins with great possibilities for us as a College and for each of us as individuals.

Thanks to having rented the Deanery between this Cathedral and the College – the delightful house that is normally the home of the Cathedral Dean – we have been able to have what is almost certainly the largest student body in the history of the College. With so many excellent students wanting to be in College, and – frankly – with the rental crisis meaning that affordable alternatives are so hard to find, we have been delighted to enable so many young people of potential to benefit from the opportunity to be at St Mark’s.

We have many excellent student leaders, and an excellent staff team to support all our students.

Last year, our students achieved much of which to be proud, and this year we will build on what was achieved so well last year. Amongst much else last year:

- Overall, our academic results were excellent,

- many students took part in community service activities through the Charitable Foundation and in other ways,
- Marksenfest returned after the COVID hiatus as a very successful celebration of music and the arts, and
- in sport – you may have forgotten – we won the High Table Cup.

Hashtag: it's staying home.

As we build this year on the achievements of the past, we must also accept some elements of change and renewal that we did not seek.

The Reverend Grant Moore has been Chaplain of the College since 2014. Grant and Ellie came to St Mark's for three years – nine years ago. We are so grateful that they have stayed, including at my request, as such much-valued members of our community, despite their understandable wishes to retire. Grant has already retired from his part-time parish role in North Adelaide, and the Archbishop has recently asked him – that almost means instructed him – to move to a short stand-in role as priest of a parish church in the western suburbs before he retires, at the age of 75, later this year.

I am sorry therefore to announce that Grant will be retiring as our Chaplain on St Patrick's Day, the 17th of March, and he and Ellie will be transferred by the Archbishop to their new, temporary parish before finally retiring.

We have so much to be grateful to both Grant and Ellie for, and – while it is not common to applaud in church – I think it is very fitting that we should give them a round of applause to express our thanks and our best wishes. ...

Thank you again, Grant and Ellie.

After Grant's transfer to his temporary parish, until a new Chaplain is appointed, I am glad to say that our 8am Monday prayers will continue in the Chapel, led by one of our student leaders; and the Rev'd Sally Sandford-Morgan, an Assistant Priest here at the Cathedral, will lead our Founders' Day Service on Sunday 30 April, at which everyone is warmly welcome.

Our Founders' Day Service, which marks St Mark's Day and Anzac Day, also honours those who through vision, hard work, and generous philanthropy founded the College nearly a century ago. As we continue to prepare to mark the College's centenary in two years' time, we will also continue our work to try "to support all students who need it through a major expansion of scholarships and other financial support for students".

We hope that, as throughout the College's history, those who have benefited from what the College does for students, and friends of the College who have seen and value those benefits, will do all they can to hand them on even better to future generations.

But now it is time for the current generation of students – the St Mark's students of 2023 – to make the very most you can of the great opportunities that lie before you – in College, at university, and in the wider community and wider world.

The Top Gun: Maverick video for Welcome Week ended with the line: “We’re ready... are you?”

I hope that the last week has helped you to be ready to make the most of 2023.

“We’re ready... are you?”