

St Mark's Commencement Service 2024 – Sermon/Address

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Each morning is a new beginning. And that's lovely. Except that, for each one of us, each morning is different. Perhaps you leapt out of bed today, went for a run, led a yoga session and then ate a healthy breakfast. Perhaps you fell out of bed this morning, reaching for the Panadol and crawled off to eat a very heavy breakfast while deeply regretting what you did last night. Same morning, different experiences.

And so it is with every new start.

I agree with Don, as your academic year begins and your first or renewed time at St Mark's commences, there is every reason to hope that this will be a good year. But it's not just one year, it's about 250 individual years, each of them beginning and belonging to just one of you.

Of course there are some similarities. You are part of this community. You will be studying. And, most importantly – at least from my perspective – God will be with you in every moment.

It's part of my job to remind you that, whether you believe in God or not, God believes in you. God does not shy away from the rough nights or the best days, from the broken heart or the wonder of new love. God is there in the dark and the light, always wanting to work with you to get the best out of life. At least that's the God I believe in. And that's the God who believes in you.

A very great Christian writer, Henri Nouwen, wrote the following.

"We must learn to live each day, each hour, yes, each minute as a new beginning, as a unique opportunity to make everything new. Imagine that we could live each moment as a moment pregnant with new life. Imagine that we could live each day as a day full of promises. Imagine that we could walk through the new year always listening to the voice saying to us: "I have a gift for you and can't wait for you to see it!" Imagine.

Is it possible that our imagination can lead us to the truth of our lives? Yes, it can! The problem is that we allow our past, which becomes longer and longer each year, to say to us: "You know it all; you have seen it all, be realistic; the future will just be a repeat of the past. Try to survive it as best you can." There are many cunning foxes jumping on our shoulders and whispering in our ears the great lie: "There is nothing new under the sun... don't let yourself be fooled."

When we listen to these foxes, they eventually prove themselves right: our new year, our new day, our new hour become flat, boring, dull, and without anything new.

So what are we to do? First, we must send the foxes back to where they belong: in their foxholes. And then we must open our minds and our hearts to the voice that resounds through the valleys and hills of our life saying: "Let me show you where I live among my people. My name is 'God-with-you.' I will wipe all the tears from your eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness. The world of the past has gone'".

Now, I think that's a beautiful set of words. I think it's deeply inspiring. But it's important that you know something about the person who wrote those words, because it's too easy to think that the type of person who could write this had it all together. Not so.

Henri Nouwen was a Catholic priest. He was also gay, and struggled throughout his life with celibacy, with depression and with even admitting his feelings. Despite being a sought-after speaker who travelled the world, he chose to live in and return to a community of adults

with intellectual disabilities. He took the time, despite his own concerns, to write many books and over 1600 letters to friends and admirers who sought his help.

He was a mixed-up mess of a person - and he was absolutely wonderful. Today, people read his books because he learnt - through trial and error - to be compassionate and humble, and wise.

The readings we heard earlier exhorted us to seek wisdom and to live lives of almost impossible virtue, guided by values that are admirable.

Here's the rub. We probably can't do this. Not yet. Some of us don't even want to. And we definitely can't do it alone.

So why - as Nouwen's words suggest we might - should we even try?

You already know the answer to this.

We pursue or stumble towards wisdom, which is gained gradually, through that process of trial and error and through the passing of time, because wisdom allows us to walk in the world less afraid and more open to wonder. Wisdom helps us to be kinder to others, knowing that kindness is the greatest gift we can bestow on others.

And we put our names to the Living Document of Values - promising to live with Integrity, Collegiality, Respect, Growth, and Generosity, because we know that if we live into these values, the whole community will flourish and that we - you - will feel safe, respected and valued.

But, when you signed that document, nothing magical happened. Signing the document didn't give you values - it gave you ideals, something to strive towards. You start with an ideal, an idea of how you want to behave and what sort of person you want to be, and then you live into those ideals until they become a part of you - at which point they become values you live by.

Most of you are at the beginning of that process. And you're going to stuff it up. Regularly. I did. It was one of my strengths - stuffing things up. I hurt people I never wanted to hurt because I was an arrogant, egotistical young man. I swore I'd never do something - and then I did it. I swore I'd do something and then I didn't.

Look around this Cathedral and you'll see a bunch of 'older' people. We've all made a lot of mistakes. Hopefully we've learned and hopefully we now have values we can live by. Hopefully.

What I'm trying to say is, do your best to live well and to encourage each other to do that as well. We all do better when we know that those around us have our backs. But expect to make mistakes. When you do, own them and apologise and cop what comes. Mistakes are common. Many - if not most of them - can be forgiven. Some have serious consequences. Try and avoid those!

One of the great antidotes to the self-hatred we often feel when we do stuff things up, is the process of forgiveness. Sometimes we must seek it from the other, the one we've hurt - and sometimes we have to wait for it to be given. But it's always best to seek forgiveness. Honestly and humbly and patiently. And sometimes we need to forgive ourselves - and the process is the same. I can recall things I did when I was younger that took me decades to forgive myself for.

If you choose to genuinely seek wisdom and aspire to turning your ideals into lived values, you will avoid some of this pain. And, if you choose to do this as a community, you will be part of something truly life-giving and memorable.

And just like Henri Nouwen – and me- you don't have to be amazing to give this a go. This Cathedral contains images of Jesus of Nazareth. He was a young man who was dead by the time he was 33. He was killed by a brutal regime as a political and religious agitator. As far as we know he never wrote anything, yet more words have been written about him than perhaps any other human who ever lived. He lived a life of such astounding wisdom and built a community founded on values that are eternally important.

During his life he was noticed but not famous. He was followed by people who – on the whole - had no power or influence. Yet this extraordinary building is dedicated to him – and Peter the fisherman, who was one of his best mates. Across the world there are thousands of buildings like this, built to honour him. There are billions of people who still listen to his wisdom and ascribe to the values he taught.

Love the Lord you God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength – and love you neighbour as yourself.

You may not think that you're one of the stars of St Mark's. You might be unsure about your capacity to be a person who influences college culture for the better. You may feel as if you're one of the messed-up people – like Henri Nouwen, and me.

Here's the thing. Step towards wisdom. Step into those ideals and values. Take the risk of trying to be the person you really want to be.

It takes courage. It's a long journey.

Here in the house of God, we believe in you. We think that each and every one of you – with no exceptions at all – is a gift to the world, and we want you to become everything you can be. The best version of yourself. The kindest. The most amazing. The wisest. The gentlest.

Tomorrow morning, just like today, you're going to wake up again. Some will leap into tomorrow. Others will crawl. Same old, same old.

But here's the thing, tomorrow you get to choose. You get to decide whether you're going to step into the world and allow your mixed-up, gloriously beautiful life to make the world a better place. Or not.

Choose well. God believes in you. I believe in you. And we're going to keep bugging you to be brilliant. We're going to keep reminding you that we think you're wonderful.

Tomorrow morning take a quiet moment to remember that your choices matter.

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Companion.

Amen.