

Founders' Day 2024

We gather today to honour those who have gone before us and to recommit ourselves to a set of values, ideals and understanding that will stand us in good stead, both for the present day and the coming age.

We gather to honour St Mark, a young man we believe was a co-worker with the great Saints, Peter and Paul. Tradition suggests that Mark's Gospel is based on the direct teaching of the man on whom Christ placed the leadership of the church – St Peter. It is appropriate that this college, named for Mark, stands so close to our Cathedral, named for Peter, continuing that powerful relationship. Mark's is the earliest and most urgent of the Gospels. Mark's life was entirely dedicated to proclaiming the Gospel of truth, freedom, equality, reconciliation and love, into a world still governed by fear and violence. Mark died a martyr's death, never renouncing his hope.

We gather to honour those who have served, and those who have fallen, in service of this country. We recall those who showed courage – who faced down fear because they believed that they should stand up to evil and protect the freedoms we enjoy. We also remember those who were not heroes, those who felt the fear of death in the face of horror, knowing that ours is not to judge, and thankful that many of us have not faced that trial.

We also remember those victims of war: women, men, children, the elderly, the infirm, who lost their lives as what some have callously described as 'collateral damage'. They are no less remembered, and they are no less valuable in the eyes of God. Today we honour them equally.

We gather to honour the founders of this college. People who, having survived the First World War, had every reason to retreat into an exhausted self-interest, but chose instead, to marshal their resources and create a place where lives could be shaped that would make a better world – and better people. Theirs was a vision of trust in a future that must have been hard to grasp in the wake of war.

Linda read to us from Isaiah.¹ The passage describes a jaded people, unsure that they had a future, inspired and uplifted and called by their God to re-imagine the world they were to step into.

¹ Isaiah 40: 27-31.

In like manner, our Founders were inspired by their faith to pursue a vision of the world, shaped by tenets of Christian understanding and social responsibility. They did not grow weary. They did not faint from the task.

From where we stand, it is perhaps too easy to assume that what they did was a natural response. But I think it was divinely inspired. They had experienced a war which is grimly described in Wilfred Owen's poem, *Anthem for Doomed Youth*.

Anthem for Doomed Youth

Wilfred Owen

*What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.*

*What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.*

Our Founders did not draw down the blinds. They, like St Mark, and all who have chosen to struggle for a better world, chose to let light in. They gave of themselves and of their resources to ensure that St Mark's would become a place where young minds and bodies and dreams and aspirations would find company and challenge, nurture and encouragement. Where human beings would be formed, who would go out from the gates of St Mark's to serve their community - and their church.

The Gospel Reading for today² – thank you, Will – describes a meeting between Jesus and one of the scribes, a type we usually associate with resistance to Jesus' work and teaching. But this passage describes a meeting of minds. An exchange of questions. An understanding of the good in the other. Both men commend each other, having agreed when – perhaps – they expected to disagree. The son of God and the teacher of the law perceive in each other a shared truth.

² Mark 12: 28-34.

What they agree about is disconcertingly simple – but profoundly important. The greatest commandments: to love God and to love your neighbour. To honour the sacred and embrace the mystery of life – and to treat every human being with the grace and kindness that we all long to receive from others. On such simple but complex teaching the future rests.

In an ever more anxious world, an ever more frightening world, St Mark's remains as a beacon of light. Here, members of this community learn to accommodate difference. Here, members of this community learn to stand up for what they believe to be true. Here, every member of this community is exhorted to excellence and to service, to embrace a model of life that, for all the rough edges that are inevitable when you gather 250 young people in one place, remains a sign of great goodness in the world.

I'm not telling you anything you don't know. I recognise that some of you are old collegians. You have been part of this courageous experiment. You have reaped the benefits, and you continue to support – and I hope, pray for - the ongoing work of the college.

What I hope to do today is remind you all that, despite St Mark's existing at a very different point in history from those early days, despite the college responding to the needs of a contemporary world, this place remains vitally important.

Built on the sacrifice of the Founders, inspired by the sacrifice of the diggers, and reflecting the sacrifice of Christ, St Mark's continues to play its part in creating a world we can look at with hope, rather than fear.

I'm new here, and I was never a student in residence. All I can tell you is what I see. I see young people who are happy. Who are cared for. Who care for each other. I see staff who are not just marking time, but genuinely giving themselves to the task of supporting young humans as they become what God has called them to be.

While I have no doubt that Christ would have some searching questions for those of us who live and work here today, I am equally confident that – as in the passage from St Mark's Gospel – He would see in this college a desire to fulfil the Great Commandments, and he would approve.

Thank you for your ongoing participation in that work. For those of you who have returned to St Mark's today, I encourage your ongoing support and prayers for the young people who are in residence today. For those of you who are current members of the community, remember that you are part of something utterly worthwhile.

Every one of you is a child of God. Each of you is a candle lit against the darkness. Together, we are a beacon of hope.

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

The Rev'd Canon Stephen Daughy

28-4-24 Founders' Day