

“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 26 February 2022

Thanks so much, Deni and Izzy¹, for that fabulous rendition of “A Life That’s Good”, a song which you may well know from the American country music TV series “Nashville”, now streaming on Stan, as you probably knew long before I did!

It’s a haunting refrain, isn’t it? –

“At the end of the day, Lord I pray
I have a life that's good.”

It gets you thinking about what is “a life that’s good”, and how we do what we can to “have a life that’s good”.

This had me thinking back to an eternity ago – well, nine days actually, but it feels like much longer – when our College Club President, Caitlin Glascott, gave such an excellent speech of welcome to our new students in our Admission Ceremony on the College tennis courts.

While acknowledging the anxiety that new students naturally feel in coming into a new environment, Caitlin spoke about making the most of the opportunities that St Mark’s offers for developing “healthy, lifelong friendships”, of an “environment that encourages academic excellence” and also “supports students and allows them to thrive” – as she put it, being “given the opportunity to flourish in all aspects of life whether that’s social, academic, arts, cultural, sport”.

I was really struck when Caitlin said that at St Mark’s you “get the opportunity to meet amazing people and become the best version of yourself”.

That’s a wonderful phrase – “become the best version of yourself”. It seems to me that all of us should aspire to become, and should work to become, “the best version” of ourselves.

One way of thinking about St Mark’s is that it exists to give students the opportunity and the support to do just that.

What you study and how well you do in your studies, what friendships you make, what extra-curricular interests you pursue, what values you develop and how well those values are reflected in how you behave and how you use your time – all these things help to shape who you are becoming.

In every one of those things, you have choices to make. Your choices will help to shape who you will become.

¹ Despina Eleftheriadis, accompanied by Isabel Unwin on piano.

The appearance in Thursday's Quiz Night of the Magical Harrys brought to mind that wonderful line in Harry Potter where Dumbledore explains that "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."

And, like Caitlin, my hope is that your choices will show, and will lead you to be, "the best version of yourself".

The Bible readings in today's service give pointers to what being the best version of ourselves might look like, and they very much reflect the values of this College.

Our Director of Learning, Dr Katrina Stats, read a passage from Proverbs about seeking wisdom: "happy are those who find wisdom", which is "more precious than jewels".

And our College Club President read the passage from Luke's Gospel where, in answer to the question "And who is my neighbour", Jesus told the parable – the story – of the Good Samaritan.

When I googled the phrase "Good Samaritan" the other day, the first thing that came up was the café called the Good Samaritan in the Cathedral Hotel just around the corner. And then I couldn't help thinking back to the profile on Caitlin on the first-year students' Facebook page before the new students arrived, where Caitlin listed her hobbies as "playing monopoly deal and going to the Good Samaritan everyday".

So it seemed especially fitting that, as a devotee of the Good Samaritan café, Caitlin should read the parable of the Good Samaritan today – a story that illustrates that, in loving our neighbour as ourselves, we should embrace everyone as our neighbour, however different from us they might be, or however hostile to them we might otherwise be inclined to be.

In Jesus's story, after all, it is the foreigner, the Samaritan, who provides help to the person in need, while his compatriots, who should have been expected to show mercy, walk by on the other side.

The parable of the Good Samaritan conveys a message of helping strangers – and that is something that we at St Mark's, who are so good at supporting each other, also aspire to do, as part of our commitment to serve, not only our own community, but the wider community, and especially those in need.

So we can think of "a life that's good" not only as a life in which we feel fulfilled and happy and settled in ourselves – which is of course important – but we can also think of it in terms of doing good, being a force for good, in the world around us – through our choices, through our actions, through our kindness and our love for others.

Doing this – aiming to be a force for good – has the double benefit of giving meaning and purpose in our own lives as well as helping others.

This commitment to helping others is wonderfully reflected, for example, in the work of our Charitable Foundation – in preparing meals at Café Outside the Square for people experiencing homelessness or other disadvantage, or putting together packages for needy children through Anglicare, or fundraising for various charities as we did during Thursday's Quiz Night, or in other ways.

This and other work by members of St Mark's in service to the wider community wonderfully reflects one of the core reasons why the founders of the College nearly a

century ago created St Mark's – to promote what they called “the ideal of service”, and to promote what has been described as “the application of a trained academic mind to ideals of service to the wider community”.

In my mind, the two readings for today point to precisely this as elements of being the best version of ourselves – seeking wisdom, and applying our wisdom, knowledge, and skills to the service of others, including through being the Good Samaritan, the one who helps rather than walks by on the other side.

Our new students have devoted their spare hours over recent days to carefully studying the College Handbook, in preparation for this morning's all-important Fresher Exam. They will therefore know, as our returners already knew, that page 7 of the Handbook says, and I quote: “The College prayer and hymn beautifully express the values for which the College stands as an academic institution that promotes service to others.”

The College hymn, which we will soon sing, says this so clearly in its third verse, which asks that the wisdom of “those who teach and those who learn” should be turned from selfish ends to serve God's plan for our fellow men and women.

The College hymn also reflects our gratitude to those who founded and have built this College, of whom we will learn more and more as we head towards the College's centenary in 2025, and as we mark the 40th anniversary this year of coeducation at St Mark's. You may have spotted yesterday that we have started publishing our online profiles of 40 St Mark's women to mark this anniversary, beginning with a profile of Mrs Diana Medlin, whose appointment as the first woman member of the College Council in 1981 helped to prepare the way for coeducation in 1982.

The College hymn also asks that the qualities we revere in our benefactors – those whose generosity, vision, and labour so significantly help to create the opportunities we enjoy – [that those qualities] may be shown in us. This reflects the St Mark's tradition of giving back, of those who benefit from all that St Mark's offers gratefully doing what they can to hand the College on even better to those who come after.

And the College hymn urges:

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

This really takes us back to having “a life that's good”, as Deni sang, and to Caitlin's hope that we all aspire to be “the best version of” ourselves – not just for our own sake, but for the sake of others.

In seeking to be the best versions of themselves, the students of St Mark's in 2022 will be supported by an excellent staff team, including with the new position of Director of Wellbeing and a new mentoring and advisory position, as well as our new Dean and Director of Learning; and they will be supported by excellent student leaders, to whom we have so much reason to be grateful – as we are to Bishop Chris McLeod, the Dean of the Cathedral, for his warm welcome to us today to this Cathedral, with which the College has had strong links since our foundation.

Whatever the pandemic, State and national politics, or grave international crises may throw at us in 2022, I am optimistic that this will be a great year for the students of St Mark's, and I know it will be a great year of opportunity for everyone who truly aims to be the best version of themselves.

I hope that that will be you.