University of Divinity Graduation Address
Adelaide 4 December 2015

Introduction
Chancellor, Bishop John, graduates and distinguished guests: I would like to thank you very much for the invitation to address this graduation ceremony tonight. It is a great privilege and honour.

In the last couple of weeks, I have had several of my students come up to me with expressions of jubilation that their course is finished: ‘Thank God that’s over!’ one of them said fervently, before hastening to reassure me that she’d loved every minute of it.

And so, this evening, we gather as academic students and staff within the University of Divinity to celebrate the conclusion of our academic courses. But, of course, it is not as simple as that. We also gather tonight as disciples of Jesus Christ, and that means we are still students — all of us, graduate and non-graduate, degreed and non-degreed — because the Greek word for ‘disciple’ (mathetes) means ‘one who learns’.

This aspect of discipleship as learning is particularly emphasised in the Gospel of Matthew, the great teaching Gospel among the four Gospels. Our passage comes from the third of Matthew’s five great discourses, which form the backbone of his narrative. All the discourses emphasise Jesus’ teaching, a teaching that is authenticated in his healing ministry which surrounds and embraces the discourses.

The third discourse contains seven parables of Jesus (13:1-53), and our passage consists of the last three: the Parables of the Treasure in the Field, the Pearl and the Dragnet (13:44-50). These conclude with a proverb about the wise scribe who is ‘trained or learned in the kingdom of heaven’ (13:52).

Matthew’s parables offer us remarkable insights into what it means for us to learn, to be students of Christ. Here, in this academic context, we are speaking of a more objective kind of knowing, an academic process of learning, with criteria and objectives, with measured ways of testing and expanding our knowledge. But even in this University setting, we are not separating the academic knowledge from the other kind: the intuitive and creative knowing, the kind of knowing which engages not only our minds but also our hearts: the knowledge that is, in some ways, closer to wisdom.

With this mind, we note briefly four points about our learning from this passage:

1. Imagery
Jesus teaches by means of images and stories. Far from giving dry lectures or moralistic homilies, Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel draws pictures that engage his hearers, vivid stories that draw people into his worldview.

We can easily picture someone digging in a field, discovering a horde of buried treasure and running off to beg or borrow as much money as possible to buy the field. We can picture a merchant, whose hobby for collecting pearls has become something of an obsession, who
finds an exquisite pearl and sells everything to possess it. And we can picture a fishing net with its great catch of fish, being dragged ashore and sorted by the fishermen, who throw some fish back into the sea and keep the ones that will sell. These images engage us; they capture our imaginations.

Even without an explicit interpretation, these parables draw us already into the dynamic of the kingdom. In our response to the story, we are already encountering the kingdom: its surprising presence and the joy it brings, the sense of wondrous discovery, the radical conversion of life. These parables express something of what the kingdom is, what it does, how it operates. And, in being drawn into the imagery and story, we are already engaged in learning, learning in the deepest sense.

Perhaps you might think that that is the kind of learning for children rather than adults. But let me remind of Jesus’ words in the fourth discourse of Matthew: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’ (18:3). We learn best as children do, through image and symbol, through vision and narrative.

2. Learning
The Parables of the Treasure and the Pearl outline the process by which we learn, the way learning comes to us. In the first parable, the finding is accidental and comes as a result of chance. In the second parable, there is an intense seeking which is finally rewarded. Our learning is like that. Sometimes it comes to us as an unexpected gift, a gift of grace, which we have not asked for or sought. At other times, we seek knowledge and find it after great toil and effort.

Tonight most of you will be conscious of the labour of these past few years and perhaps identify more with the merchant than the digger in the field. But actually, if you look back over these past years, you will realise that you have learned in both ways: accidentally as well as deliberately, unconsciously as well as consciously. Knowledge can be a delightful surprise to enjoy as well as a task to be undertaken with commitment and discipline.

To use the imagery of the Dragnet, we gather knowledge and learning as we proceed, our arms extended to embrace whatever we can. But we need then to sit down and begin the long, slow, reflective process of sorting it: what we need and what we don't need, what works and what doesn't work, what challenges us and what leaves us complacent, what takes deep root and what springs up all too quickly to wither in the scorching sun.

We learn in more ways than one, and we need time to reflect deeply on our learning.

3. Storehouse
What we build up through learning — what we gather together and sift through — becomes a storehouse of knowing and awareness that we can use in our ministry and in our lives. The scribe whom Matthew pictures is a householder or household manager with a store-room full of useful things, ready to be produced when the need arises: food and wine, blankets and clothing, cloaks for cold weather, bags and staffs for travelling, jewelry and perfume for special occasions. And Matthew recognises that this storehouse contains things that are both new and old: new contexts, new insights, new learnings in the same cupboard as
knowledge that has been passed down through the generations and has stood the test of
time.

The wise scribe knows what is needed, knows what will stimulate and cause to grow, knows
how and when to produce it. Nor will this wise scribe want to use her knowledge to
intimate, dominate, impress or patronise. If we are learned in the kingdom of heaven, we
will be like Christ: meek and humble, gentle of heart, open to give and to receive, ready to
be led further down and deeper into the paths of wisdom.

The wise scribe is one who never ceases to learn, never stops building up and replenishing
the storehouse with things new and things old.

4. Transformation
Finally, this kind of learning effects in us and in others a transformation. In the Parables of
the Treasure and the Pearl, worlds are turned upside down. Both characters, without
hesitation, give up everything they possess in order to obtain the costly treasure, the
precious pearl.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew’s first discourse, Jesus contrasts ‘treasures on earth’
with ‘treasures in heaven’ (6:19-21). Significantly, the Greek is emphatic in its use of the verb
as well as the noun for ‘treasure’ — literally: ‘Do not treasure to yourselves treasures on
earth …’ (thesaurizo, thesauros). A little later in the Sermon Jesus speaks of seeking first
God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness (6:33).

The same imagery is present in our two parables of discovery. Even though they speak of
earthly treasures — the buried horde, the exquisite pearl — the language is clearly
metaphorical. Jesus is directing his disciples to seek, above all else, God’s kingdom, the
gracious and sovereign rule of heaven. This is the celestial treasure ‘where neither moth nor
rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal’ (6:20). It is a treasure that can
never be damaged and never be taken from us, no matter what else we lose.

The challenge for us as disciples, as students of Christ, is to ask ourselves what we value
most, what we treasure in our truest selves, our deepest hearts. Once we know where the
heart lies, then we know the direction. We know what needs to be surrendered more and
more, what we need to let go of, what we need to abandon. And this process of ongoing
conversion, that transformation, is precisely the capacity to return again and again to the
centre and to sit as students at Jesus’ feet.

In the end, the real Seeker in all of this is God, the God who has long sought us and has
found us in Christ. Our seeking has its place but in the end it is God’s seeking of us, God’s
finding of us, God’s teaching of us that makes all the difference, that makes possible the
transformation of our hearts and minds and lives.

Conclusion
And so tonight we celebrate the learning each one of you has achieved. We give thanks to
God for your readiness to search, with all its labour and times of frustration, as well as joys.
We celebrate your openness of heart, your readiness to question, to re-think, to reflect, to

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enter into dialogue with others who may not share your views. And tonight we acknowledge also those who have taught you, who have been likewise open-hearted, who have given you much, but who have also received and learned from you.

Of course we hope that you will come back for further study and that you will be life-long learners. But there is more to learning that further courses of study and more degrees, important though they undoubtedly are. You might even want to rejoice like my student and say, ‘Thank God it’s over!’

But there is another school from which none of us will ever graduate, and that school is the kingdom of heaven. You and I remain students in that school where Matthew, among others, teaches. We will never cease from being Christ’s disciples. We will always be students of the one who calls us to learn from him, because he is ‘meek and lowly of heart’, and who promises us rest (11:29). In the divine school, rest is not just something to be gained at the end of our labours, as we are experiencing this evening; rather that divine rest is found in the very midst of our labours. As we strive to learn more and more of God’s ways, we are at the same time embraced by Christ’s rest, who is himself the Wisdom of God.

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