Graduation Address
The Revd Sharon Hollis

Acknowledgement of country

Thank you to the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor for the invitation to give this address. I am grateful for the prompt this invitation provided to reflect on back on my own journey into theological education and what I have gained from theological education. My journey begun in a formal sense a quarter of a century ago when I started a BD. For the last decade I worked in life long learning where it has been my enormous privilege to facilitate ongoing learning for people working day in day out with the learning, wisdom and tools of their theological education, helping them to continue to learn, to grow and develop. I believe that those of us who teach owe a debt of gratitude to you our students who interact with us, push us, learn from us, teach us and create with us communities of learning. As I have done this work, and as I prepare to leave it I have been reflecting on how grateful I am. So what I want to offer tonight are some words of gratitude for my theological education by focusing on two gifts I have most appreciated, that I have grown into.

The first gift I give thanks for is the capacity to accept and live with failure and disappointment. The biblical narrative tells the story of people who constantly failed, failed to understand the breadth and depth of God and God’s nature, failed to understand how God works in the works, failed to understand how God calls people to bear witness in the world. An awareness of the history of biblical scholarship reminds us both how wonderfully scholarship opens up new insights and knowledge into these ancient texts and how often the quest is undermined by cultural captivity. Even a brief romp through church history, particularly since the voice of the ordinary, the least, the marginal has been listened is that failure is inevitable, but is not the last word and can be transformed into something new and good. Think of Peter and his denying Jesus before the crucifixion, Columba and his exile to Iona, think of Martin Luther and his sense of never being able to earn God's love, or Mary Ward and her long journey to have her new women’s religious order recognised or John Wesley returning in disgrace from America or Mary McKillop's struggle to educated the poor of Australia, A rigorous study of history gives me a great sympathy for their weakness a kindness to judge them by the standards of their own time rather than mine and a deep sense that when you acknowledge your own failure, turn from it and move forward with humility new things emerge, things that are transformative not just for the individual and but also for the broader society they were part of. Theology has taught me Failure is rarely easy to live with, it is rarely welcomed but it can be borne and it can be part of seeking to live. It strikes me as no accident that one of the most respected leadership educators of the last 20 years Ronald Heifetz grounds much of educating of leaders in the capacity to acknowledge learn and grow from failure. Theology has taught me to learn to live with failure because I am in good company in the communion of saints. It has taught me to act boldly, not foolishly, not without thinking but to be brave because failure cannot, will not separate me from God or God's mercy and grace. The church so desperately needs people that will take thoughtful faithful risks for the sake of God’s reign.

The second gift of theological education that I want to give thanks for is the gift of hope and how hope speaks into human suffering. I still have vivid memories of studying Christology in my first year, reading Moltmann’s Crucified God and feeling like my sure secure sense of God and faith was
falling apart in the face of the new ideas, that I no longer knew what I hoped for who I hoped in. Out the rubble of deep unknowing a fear that nothing might be left in the rubble of my not knowing emerged a sense of hope that had space for suffering and for ambiguity. My study of scripture, the many wise teachers from across 2 Millenia of Christian history and the community of students and staff helped me rethink what and how I believed so that I came to develop a deep understanding hope in both God's promise to both make all things new and to be present in the midst of the messiness of human living. I have appreciated this gift so often, none more so than when I was confronted in a very personal way with the agony of grieving the death of my beloved partner in very circumstances. To have had the opportunity of spending twenty years testing my understanding of hope in the face of suffering and illness and death and in the joy of birth and love and commitment was such a gift as I wrestled with whether I could still hope in the midsts of suffering, and to have learnt through lived experience that what I had learnt and taught held true. Hoping in God can carry me through suffering in love. I have seen this gift of a deep thoughtful understanding of hope bear fruit in theological graduates I've worked with as they birth new expressions of church trusting that God is doing new things, advocated for justice, and developing social policy, ministered in times of death and suffering, celebrated new. I have appreciated this gift in people that know silence is sometimes the best expression of hope that God is with us in our suffering and in people who have used their theological education to speak into painful, complex ambiguous situations with truth, depth, honesty and a deep hope that all will be well and all things will be well. In a world where we are anxious about climate change, where the gap between rich and poor is growing and exposing a deep sense of hopelessness we need people like you to offer words of hope that is not glib or flippant or full of simple positive thinking but is grounded in tradition and capable of holding together love and suffering in ways that invites social and personal renewal.

I did not leave theological college knowing all this in a neat package, but I was given the resources, tools, language and concepts to think about my own life experience, the society in which I live and the church which I belong to theologically. It equipped me to ask deep questions and to be dissatisfied with easy answers. Whether you are graduating with a diploma, a PhD or something in between the journey of theological education has not finished. Your own life, the life you share with friends and family, the questions raised by society, by our politics, by the profound challenges the world faces all demand you continue your theological learning, that you ground it in your lived experience and you keep growing and refining your understanding of yourself, of humanity of creation and the Holy with the knowledge and wisdom you have gained. I hope you will find, as I have, it is a journey filled with gratitude for what you have gained during your time of theological study and full of excitement at the ways this learning will continue to grow and unfold in your life for your own enrichment, for the benefit of the world in which you live and work.