

REFLECTIONS AT THE CONVOCATION

QUEEN'S COLLEGE, ST. JOHN'S NL

03 May 2018

God of Creation, creating anew, the silence is broken.
With the women in the garden we catch our breath,
wipe our tears and try to articulate our experience with you.
What words can describe shadows fleeing from the tomb?
How can we tell of the morning the world turned upside-down?
No mortal words will do.
Still, we must spread the news: Christ is risen!
Our knees are weak from running;
our voices tremble on the edge of fearful joy.
Our eyes have seen the glory of the Lord loosed upon the world!
May every breath we take, every word we utter, everything we do,
witness to the truth of Christ's resurrection.

On this evening of Convocation in these late Easter days, the words of Sharlande Sledge remind us that each one is here because Easter happened. Each student is graduating tonight and Queen's College exists because Easter happened. The overwhelming significance of the first Easter event is astoundingly conveyed to us by the simplest heralds: a stone, an empty tomb, fish and bread on the beach, and women.

Graduates, this moment of convocation, like that first Easter which holds you in its embrace, marks an ending and a beginning for you who are the graduates. In this moment, you are in a liminal space described by Richard Rohr as being "betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. Our old world is left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence... This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed. The threshold is God's waiting room."

We gather with you graduates in this liminal space and ask where the threshold will take you. Through the integration of learning, faith, and practice, your education has been informing, forming, and transforming you in Christian faith and identity. Thomas Groome speaks about head, heart and hands:

- ✓ *Informing is a way of the head.* It demands a discipleship of faith seeking understanding and belief with personal conviction, sustained by study, reflecting, discerning and deciding.
- ✓ *Forming is a way of the heart.* It demands a discipleship of right relationships and right desires, community building, hospitality and inclusion, trust in God's love, and prayer and worship.
- ✓ *Transforming is a way of the hands.* It demands a discipleship of love, justice, peace-making, simplicity, integrity, healing, and repentance.¹

¹ Thomas Groome, *Will There Be Faith: A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples*. HarperOne, 2011, 111-119.

Now you are graduating. You are preparing to cross the threshold into a new world, an unknown world. Let me give you some assurance as you cross that threshold by naming five signposts to guide you as you prepare to live out of and to live into the fruits of your Queen's College study. These signposts are newly emerging for all of us, but all are at the heart of our response as Christians in the twenty-first century.

A rich understanding of cosmology (our first signpost) is influencing and re-shaping how we think of God and of incarnation. Richard Rohr says it this way: "God's first idea was to become manifest – to pour out divine, infinite love into visible forms. The 'First Flaring Forth' (Big Bang) is now our scientific name for that first idea; and "Christ" is our theological name. Both are about love and beauty exploding outward in all directions. Creation is indeed the Body of God!" God's first incarnation happens in all creation; God's second incarnation comes in the person of Jesus.

This new cosmology has led to the development of what Pope Francis calls integral ecology (our second signpost) with its fundamental connections at three different levels: relationships at the atomic and molecular level, between plants and animals, and among species in ecological networks and systems; the profound interconnectedness of environmental, economic, political, social, cultural, and ethical issues; and the vision to think about comprehensive solutions to what is both an environmental and human crisis. Elizabeth Johnson describes this integral ecology more poetically, "We share with all other living creatures on our planet a common genetic ancestry. Bacteria, worms, pine trees, blueberries, horses, the great gray whales – we are all genetic kin in the great community of life. While human thought and love are distinct, they are not something injected into the universe from without. Rather, they are the flowering in us of deeply cosmic energies."

This interconnectedness means that "the cry of Earth and the cry of Poor are one." The response to this cry is also possible through interconnectedness, through the globalization of mercy (our third signpost), a globalization from below, led by "voices of women, black people, indigenous people, workers, peasants, the untouchables, the poor and even children."² In the words of Albert Nolan, "There is a globalization of anti-war and peace movements, of compassion and of the struggle for justice – an international groundswell of resistance in the name of peace, compassion and justice that will undermine and dismantle the structures of power and domination."³ All of us know the story of the Good Samaritan. Just re-imagine that story now with its five moments of mercy: the Samaritan sees contemplatively, his heart overflows with compassion, he acts to heal the man, he includes the inn-keeper in the circle of mercy, and Jesus' reflection on the story tells the lawyer "to go and do likewise" – be part of creating a culture of mercy. Five moments of mercy in response to the cry of Earth and the cry of Poor: contemplative seeing, a compassionate heart, mercy-filled actions, building circles of mercy, shaping a culture of mercy.

If we are all truly one in the sacred community of all creation, if shaping a culture of mercy is our response, then inclusion (our fourth signpost) becomes the answer to almost any question. Again in the words of Elizabeth Johnson, "The dignity of difference is a source of blessing." We say that we are called to "welcome the stranger," but how differently and how profoundly Jesus says it in the Gospel of Matthew (25:35), "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." This is radical hospitality, knowing your own vulnerability. In the words of the Buddhist nun, Pema Chödrön, "Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It is a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with

² Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today*, 29.

³ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today*, 35.

the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.” Or as Paul said, “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10).

Inclusion means that we find partners and collaborators in the most unexpected places, shown by two diverse examples. One of the most precious gifts of our time is the move to more intense and more profound interfaith dialogue, listening to God’s voice spoken with other, diverse accents. Our second example is even more unexpected. Job tells us (12:7), “Ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you. . . the hand of our God has done this.”

As you cross the threshold, the final signpost is the blessing of contemplation – contemplation both personal and communal. A poem from the Australian Michael Leunig describes contemplation so beautifully, “God help us/To live slowly/To move simply/To look softly/To allow emptiness/To let the heart create for us.” The academic standing which you are receiving from Queen’s College dares you to be a contemplative presence; dares you to see, listen and dialogue contemplatively; dares you to be a contemplative leader.

And so we return to where we began – with the Easter story. Mary and Cleopas walked across the threshold of their liminal space after Jesus broke bread with them (Lk 24:32), “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” As you prepare to walk across the threshold, what causes your heart to burn within you? Which signpost beckons you to follow: the new cosmology, integral ecology, globalization of compassion and justice, inclusion, contemplation? If your study at Queen’s College means anything, in following the signpost which first beckons, you will be led to all five signposts as your journey unfolds.

This is my blessing for each one of you (taken from a prayer service by Daniel Randall) as you follow the signposts into your sacred unknown:

Follow now the new path Christ has opened up for us.
Just around the corner of your life is a spiritual surprise!
Easter! Christ is Risen!
May you dance an alleluia dance, and sing a resurrection song.
Laugh with God and let joy reside in your hearts always.

Graduates, laugh with God, and let joy reside in your hearts always.