

Guest Speaker address at CCGS Valedictory Prize-giving 2017

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It is indeed an honour and privilege to be invited to address you at your Final Assembly.

You boys are the luckiest people that have ever lived!

We are living in an age that globally has longer life expectancy, less chance of violent death, less poverty, greater comfort, higher literacy and less inequality than at any time in history.

Luckier still, we live in a country that on all these measures is better placed than average, and on many indicators we are global leaders.

And even luckier still, in this chapel, you are the beneficiaries of a lifestyle, parentage and education that arms you with the best opportunity within this already generous space and time.

And while others in this chapel are variously middle aged or, dare I say, in their twilight years, you boys are at the threshold of your careers, and the start of a period in which you will make the greatest societal contribution through your very long lives.

This is what makes you the luckiest people to have ever lived.

You should never feel guilty or ashamed of your lucky inheritance. Your parents and grandparents cared enough to bequeath you this good fortune ... not to feel guilty about it, but to give you the very best opportunity to create even better futures for future generations.

The question is, what will you make of this opportunity, for yourself and for others?

I asked some Old Boys in their mid-twenties what advice they would have for the class of 2017.... Three messages resonated – “give back”, “be resilient”, and “remain humble”.

“Give back” through volunteering in whatever capacity you can – coach a sports team, be a tutor, join a club committee, whatever works for you. You each have talents honed through your time in this place. Giving back is the right thing to do, and also good for your personal growth.

As for resilience, one thing is for certain, the future will hold challenges, bad times, tough landings and anxiety. I trust the resilience you have learned here at Christ Church will serve you well at these times. And you will learn more through failure than success.

And as for humility... let me say... you are good, probably greatat somethings, but let's face it, you are terrible at others.

Let me use my own journey to illustrate this.

I started my career as an underground labourer in the nickel and gold mines of Kambalda, in the Eastern Goldfields. I had spent the previous two years at Oxford University immersed in privilege and the lofty ideals of philosophy, politics and economics. Landing on the plat on 14 level, 800m underground was akin to landing on a another planet!

But a whole new learning experience awaited me.... Survival – both physically and mentally, depended on listening and learning from the old hands in that mine... with humility. "Listen mate, this is the way things are done around 'ere" was a common refrain ... and believe me, it was advice worth listening to!!

You too will face this in whatever field of endeavour you pursue....

You will confront the realisation that your intellect does not impress everyone. You will be so deficient in practical skills compared to others, they won't give a toss how clever your theories are. But if you are primed to learn... learn you will...

- the geologist will learn much from the prospector;
- the engineer will learn much from the boilermaker,
- the finance grad will learn much from those wily old stockbrokers,
- the architect will learn much from the builder,
- the researcher will learn from the lab tech; and
- the doctor will learn much from the aged care worker.

It takes humility and an open mind.

Grasp the opportunity to work in roles that may seem "beneath your station" working in labouring roles taught me the privilege of my education, taught me to shun elitism, and taught me to value the contribution of everyone according to their ability.

That advice is timeless.But beyond this, you will face challenges that previous generations could not have imagined.

The march of technology particularly in the social media space has at once been incredibly empowering, but it has also reshaped social dialogue in destructive ways. You need to be acutely aware of this, and constantly vigilant of the polarising impact that platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube can have on you personally, and more broadly on society.

What I mean by this, is that these platforms are very clever at dishing up to you content that you agree with, not content you disagree with. It creates an echo chamber, and is the very antithesis of the environment of constructive debate that should hone your opinions and ideas.

You have learned much here at Christ Church, but more than anything, I hope you have learned to think and to critique. In this echo chamber, thinking and critiquing has never been more important.

Use your critical thinking skills and your Christ Church education to challenge convention and to challenge what you hear and see. The louder and longer someone shouts, the more sceptical you should be of what they are saying.

So, when you see an image of clouds of steam coming off a cooling tower with a voice over about carbon emissions, recall from your science class that CO₂ and CH₄ are invisible gases.... why are you showing me water vapour?

When someone tells you that life is not fair, recall your history class, and the plight of boys your age in the trenches of the Western Front a century ago....now that was unfair!!

When you are presented with all manner of health advice justified by amateur statisticians, recall your maths class, and that correlation is not the same as causation.

When the weather map shows deep red across 7/8ths of the continent, recall map reading from your geography class and read the legend. (deep red is a temperature greater than 28 degrees?...really?? This is an Australian weather map, not an Austrian one!)

When you hear a well-crafted argument, respect it, but recall your days on the debating team, and actively target its flaws.

When you hear the statement "settled science", recall your science class. Consensus is the antithesis of the scientific method... even the pure sciences are not settled.

When you hear of a silver bullet fix, recall your economics class, and that there is no change without consequences and that the real world is about tough trade-offs.

And when the fatalist tells you that a problem cannot be solved, that we are all doomed, recall your history of science, and how death by infectious disease was dramatically reduced by the discovery of penicillin by Fleming and Florey 75 years ago. This was as big then as a universal cancer cure would be now.

Remain optimistic, and remain determined that problems are there to be solved, and that and in some small way, you will be part of that solution.

Finally, do not be afraid of the future...rather you should embrace it. Yes, "The robots are coming"... but not as fast as you think. I first sat in a driverless mine truck in 1995... more than 20 years ago now, before you were born, and even now driverless mine trucks are still far from common. I saw an unmanned robotic warehouse on a tour of Europe in 1980, and though these are more common 40 years later, they are far from ubiquitous either.

Bring on these innovations, society needs more productive delivery of medicine, law, accounting services, and all manner of other things... In the same way as robots in manufacturing have made cars more affordable and democratic, so too hopefully your generation can use artificial intelligence and the sharing economy to make professional services more affordable and democratic too... further improving life outcomes and social equity.

As fast as some jobs are lost, new ones will be created. Be alert to this, but do not be alarmed by it.

We live in exciting times....

And this future is yours – so remember, give back, be resilient, remain humble, never stop critiquing and thinking, and do not be afraid of the future.

My best wishes to you all in your pending exams and for everything that lies beyond.

Thank you....