Graduates’ Dinner 2015

Well it doesn’t really feel as if it should be this time of the year already, does it? To me it seems as if we were just beginning yesterday. The year hurtles along, and especially this last term, and before you can blink it’s gone. But if you stop and think about it a little, you’ll realise that a lot has gone on this year. An occasion like this is usually an opportunity to be light-hearted and celebrate the achievements of a year that has provided more than enough opportunities to laugh and rejoice and be thankful. Thanks again to the Senior Students for my Martin Luther bobble head! But our joy and delight in the fellowship we enjoy in this place, in this community of
God’s people, while very real, exists in a larger context. And in that larger context it is clear that 2015 has been a year of tumultuous events all over the world.

Back in January we heard of the attack upon the cartoonists at Charlie Hebdo in France. Then, still reeling from that shock, in February this year we were exposed to a barbaric video from IS, ‘The Message signed with blood to the nation of the cross’, in which 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians were beheaded. Safe in this haven on the other side of the world you might not have registered it, but this has been a year of violence and inhumanity on a massive scale: kidnappings, ritual executions and even the blowing up of a passenger jet. The war in
eastern Ukraine, the Syrian Civil War, and much more.

Of course, one major consequence of this violence has been the refugee crisis which has gripped Europe in the last couple of months. More than 7 and a half million Syrians have lost their homes and more than 5 million have fled to neighbouring countries. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions by now, have travelled to Europe seeking a new life away from the violence.

But the turmoil has not just been from our hatred and inhumanity in our dealings with each other. The world convulsed this year: an earthquake of 7.9 on the Richter scale killed over eight and a half thousand people
in Nepal in April. The most intense hurricane ever recorded made its appearance just last month, with winds of more than 320 kilometres per hour. On the economic front, there was the Greek debt crisis and a skyrocketing property market in this city, which is just the most obvious indicator of our ever-increasing cost of living. Politically regimes were toppled this year and even here in Australia we did it again: we threw out an elected prime minister in his first term in office — it’s becoming something of a habit in Australian politics.

But while all that was going on, we gathered here in this place—surrounded by demolition and construction yes, but in relative safety and security and freedom—to
sit under God’s word together and to be shaped and prepared and equipped together to take the gospel of a crucified and risen Saviour to a fragile and shaken world. And I want to remind you tonight why this has been worth it. You’ve put yourself under strain and stress, over the last couple of weeks especially, and it has been worth it. You’ve worked hard — some of you harder than others — and it has been worth it.

It’s been worth it because of how magnificent Jesus is. He is the one, the only one, who led a life of utter selflessness. His full and rich obedience to the Father who sent him, his unswerving compassion for those in need, his determination to seek out
and save the lost, his willingness to die though there was no reason in him for which he had to die, his glorious resurrection, his powerful lordly authority and yet, in fulfilment of Scripture, ‘a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory’ (Mtt 12.20). Jesus was and is totally and completely unlike any human being you are likely to meet. His motives were always pure. His compassion was always genuine. His surrender of himself for the good of others was entire and complete. And all this from the one by whom, through whom and for whom all things were made.

If there is one thing I hope you take away with you from Moore College, it is an
enlarged view of who Jesus is. It is because he is who he is that our religious play acting is unmasked as petty and in fact dangerous. It is because he is who he is that our preoccupation with our own agenda, whether it be being recognised as successful in ministry or securing a future for myself and my family, or being embraced as a reasonable Christian by the world — the same world that put Jesus to death remember — or being the Luther, Calvin, Cranmer, Owen, Packer or Stott of our age; whatever your personal distraction from a life directed by Jesus just as his was directed by his Father, it is all so very small.

Jesus relativises all of it. He shows what is important and what is not. Put him up
against the goal you have for yourself or for your church and take note of the disparity. Put him up against the best achievements of even godly men and take note of the disparity. On the last day no one will be talking about Augustine’s towering intellect, Luther’s courageous stand, Barth’s enduring theological influence. They’ll all be talking about Jesus. The Lord of glory before whom angels are perpetually bowing and giving honour, and yet the one who gave himself freely in order that the judgment each one of us deserves and the corruption each one of us has acquired might be dealt with forever.

Take from this place a preoccupation with Jesus, a preoccupation with his honour
before the whole creation, a preoccupation with his mission to save men and women, a preoccupation with the end he has secured—all things properly ordered before the throne of God—and let that shape your message, your decisions, your ministry goals and your life. All you have done over the past one, three or four years, whatever you gave up or went without in order to be here, the struggles and disappointments as well as the successes and triumphs, the long nights and the seriously unsettling challenges to change your thinking and your behaviour as we sat under the word of God together — it’s all been worth it because of him.
The simple truth is that it really is easy to have your attention diverted from Jesus. It was easy here, while you were studying, wasn’t it? It will be just as easy in the midst of the work of ministry. Other things will very easily fill your horizon. There will be other calls on your allegiance, and they won’t all be bad. It will be very easy to reimagine your task in a number of ways and forget that first and foremost we are heralds of Jesus, taking his gospel—with the need it exposes and the consequences it entails—to the ends of the earth until the end of the age. The fragile, broken, hurting world we have been part of this last year so desperately needs to hear about him, the
Prince of Peace and the only Saviour of the world.

It’s great way to celebrate, to have had this meal together. It is a wonderful climax of an extraordinary period in the life of each one of you. So as your time at Moore College draws to a close, let me encourage you to draw the various threads of what you’ve learnt and the various experiences you’ve undergone back to this point: the magnificence of Jesus, the wonder of who he is and the extraordinary thing he has done for us. Do that and you’ll realise why it has all been worth it, why there is so much to give thanks for and take delight in this evening and tomorrow and in the days ahead. When everything else is stripped
back we remain those who have ‘turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come’.

There are many people we should thank as our year draws to a close. The first group to thank is you, the graduating students. Your involvement in and contribution to our College has been very significant over the last year or three or four. Thank you for your willingness to put other things aside and give yourself to learning together in this place. Thank you for the encouragement you’ve been to the faculty and staff and the friends of the College who have visited us throughout the year.
Thank you too to the Faculty. I count it a privilege to serve alongside each one of you in this important task of passing on the faith once for all delivered to the saints and helping our students develop the skill to themselves pass on the faith to others. It has not been an easy year for some of you and I am very grateful to God not only for your commitment to the task but the humble and godly way you’ve gone about it. I am looking forward to us working together for many years to come.

Thank you to the staff of the College. We are all served by a remarkable staff in the administration, the kitchen, the library and maintenance teams. Some of their service is obvious and some not so much so. But I am
grateful, as I am sure we all are, for the diligence and skill and the graciousness that has characterised the work of the staff in every department this year.

Thank you finally to the Governing Board, many of whom have joined us tonight. Your service of our College in your important role is not seen by many at all, but we are so dependent upon all that you do. Thank you for your time, the skills and gifts you have brought to the work of governing our College, and your willingness to give so generously to this work. Thank you especially to the President of our Governing Board, Archbishop Davies. We really do appreciate all that you do to support and encourage the work of the College.
Only one more thing to go, after tonight: the joy and celebration of ‘Final Friday’ tomorrow. I hope those of you and your families who can make it will come and share the Lord’s Supper with us at 10.30am tomorrow and then enjoy a BBQ with us afterwards. From this vantage point it does not seem the weather will be the best. But it will be a great day nevertheless.

So now I’d like to close by praying for those finishing their study at College this year and especially for the relationships begun and developed here over the past four years.