

Sermon honouring the University of Otago's 150th Anniversary

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Sunday 2 June 2019 at Knox Church, Dunedin

Texts: Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Here we are celebrating 150 years of daring to be wise, just as the promotional material for the sesquicentennial celebrations invited us to do. And we've been doing it in style this weekend thanks to the wonderful efforts of the organisers of the celebrations.

But celebrating daring to be wise does beg the question: What is wisdom?

Moreover, what motivated our University's founding figures to choose the Motto, *Sapere Aude*, Dare to be Wise in the first place? What did Wisdom comprise for them? And what does it comprise for us?

The first thing we should acknowledge is that a significant number of the founding figures of our University, including members of the first University Council, were prominent churchmen. Counted among them were two leading men from this church: the Rev Dr Donald Stuart, Minister of Knox Church, Mr Edward Cargill, an Elder of Knox Church and a future Mayor of Dunedin. Other prominent churchmen included the Rev Dr Thomas Burns, Minister of First Church of Otago and the first Chancellor of the University,¹ and the Hon Major Sir John Richardson, a devout Anglican and the first Vice-Chancellor of the University.²

In adopting the motto *Sapere Aude*, Dare to be Wise, these churchmen and their colleagues and successors on the University Council may well have looked to the man to whom the Motto has been most often attributed, the eighteenth century German philosopher and champion of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant.

For Kant, "Dare to be Wise" constituted a call to have the courage to use your own reason, to think for yourself, to liberate yourself from a state of ignorance.

Insofar as Kant's use of the Motto represented a rallying cry for an uncompromising pursuit of truth and knowledge, it captured something essential to the task of a University and laid a foundation for what we now simply take for granted as part of the DNA of a university: critical thinking and evidence-based research.

¹ Although the Rev Burns at the time of his appointment as Chancellor was in retirement and of such precarious health that he would not live long enough to see the opening of the University two years later, his name lent significant weight to the enterprise.

² The Hon Major Sir John Richardson was a retired military man and politician who, together with his friend and neighbour, Miss Learmonth Dalrymple, championed educational rights for women, including the admission of women as students to the University of Otago. Their successful advocacy meant that Otago became the first Australasian University to admit women as students, paving the way for the likes of Caroline Freeman (education), Emily Siedeberg (medicine) and Ethel Benjamin (law).

From its inception, this University has been committed not only to critical thinking and evidence-based research, but also to an integrated and progressive view of education, which was a legacy of the Scottish Reformation. The admission of women as students, for example, was entirely in keeping with the Scottish view, borne of the sixteenth century Reformation, that education should be available to all, and that access to higher education should be on the basis of merit, not on the basis of gender, family name or the school one attended.

In 1961, George Davie summed up this Scottish approach to education in an aptly titled book, *The Democratic Intellect*.³

A distinguishing feature of this Scottish democratic intellect was a commitment to deliver a practical, broad and liberal education, not just for the benefit of the individual, but, as had been stipulated centuries before in the Scottish *Book of Discipline* of 1560,⁴ for the “common weal”; that is, for the common good. Education with a moral or ethical imperative, if you will.

Let us pause for a moment to reiterate the nature of that progressive Scottish view of education, of which this University is both a beneficiary and an agent: practical, broad, liberal ... not for one’s own sake, but for the common good.

As represented in the St Andrew’s cross on the University’s Coat of Arms.

But not immune from differences of opinion as to what a practical, broad and liberal education might look like.⁵

One of the driving forces behind the foundation of the University was to provide a system of higher education that equipped young men and women to take up professions in a rapidly growing colony. Skills and qualifications were desperately needed. To that end, by the 1870s,

³ Davie, G., *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and her Universities in the Nineteenth Century*, Edinburgh University Press, 1961

⁴ One of the authors of the *Book of Discipline* was John Knox, after whom Knox Church and Knox College are named. When John Knox was sent into exile under the reign of Mary Stuart he ended up in Geneva, where he came under the influence of John Calvin. Geneva’s educational reforms under Calvin’s leadership persuaded Knox that public education should be available to all children from a young age without respect to gender or wealth, and that education should be viewed as a means by which people could raise themselves to make better use of their knowledge and abilities in service to God. Calvin maintained that the liberal arts are aids to a full knowledge of the Word of God, and that the Reformation could grow and increase only through a study of the arts and sciences as well as that of theology. For Calvin, education in sacred and secular subjects had the same final aim: the glory of God. In 1559 he established the Geneva Academy, which was the first Protestant University, and is now known as the University of Geneva.

⁵ One such difference of opinion became evident very early on when some prominent members of the Synod of Otago and Southland, who regarded the teaching of Professor Duncan Macgregor (the inaugural appointment to Mental and Moral Philosophy, one of three Synod-funded Chairs) to be subversive of the teachings of the Church, advocated a reconfiguration of professorial chairs to effectively prevent Professor Macgregor from holding a Church-funded chair. Although the move was not successful, the tensions and controversy remained for several years.

the University of Otago had established schools of medicine and mining, followed shortly thereafter by a cluster of other schools and faculties.⁶

This emphasis on a practical education in service of the professions did not (and does not) always sit easily alongside the commitment to a broad education, as typically represented in the arts and humanities.⁷

Or, to put it even more bluntly, as a Royal Commission did in 1925, when it warned against an over-reliance on examinations in the educative process: Obtaining a University Degree is not necessarily the same thing as acquiring a University education.⁸

Thus understood, growing in knowledge, or daring to know, is a deeply formative and multi-faceted process. Intellect and logic, certainly, but also so much more than that.

Indeed, as profound as Immanuel Kant's influence may have been on the choice of University Motto, it is also possible that Dr Stuart and Mr Cargill and their colleagues looked over Kant's shoulder to another (more ancient) source of the phrase *Sapere Aude* ... to ancient Rome and the poet Horace, who told the story of a fool waiting for a stream to cease flowing before attempting to cross it. To that person, Horace offered the following advice: "Starting a task is as good as accomplishing it. *Sapere Aude*. Dare to be wise. Begin."

One can imagine this image of a person about to cross a stream resonating with the first University Council as they considered the magnitude of the challenges before them.

To those charged with the responsibility of establishing and running a University, providing governance and leadership, determining the curriculum, appointing Professors, securing the finances, educating and caring for the young people in their charge, and who are perhaps feeling somewhat daunted by the magnitude of the task: *Sapere aude*. Dare to be wise. Begin. Take that first step.

To those at the point of commencing their higher education, perhaps mindful of the immense challenges associated with acquiring the necessary disciplines of learning and study as they acquaint themselves with, and contribute to, the vast pool of human knowledge: *Sapere aude*. Dare to be wise. Begin. Take that first step.

One wonders if the OUSA had this in mind when, in 1991, they adopted their own motto, which effectively took up the challenge. To the University's, "*Sapere Aude*, Dare to be wise," OUSA's response was (and is) "*Audeamus*, We dare!"

Daring to be wise ...

⁶ Dentistry, law, commerce and home science, followed in subsequent decades by physiotherapy, theology, radiology and surveying.

⁷ See Chapter VI, "The Dominance of the Special Schools, 1914-1945" in Morrell, W.P., *The University of Otago: A Centennial History*, Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1969, pp.117-162

⁸ Morrell, p.135

Which brings us back to the question: What is wisdom?

As we know (but so often forget), wisdom is more than the accumulation and application of knowledge. It is more than the acquisition of professional qualifications.

The ancient Greeks greatly valued wisdom. Wisdom was the noblest of human pursuits, as reflected in the respect that was accorded to philosophers, story tellers and the educated elite.

The ancient Hebrews also valued wisdom, but they understood it quite differently to the Greeks. Take our reading from Ecclesiastes, which is part of a section of the Hebrew Scriptures often referred to as the Wisdom literature.

Here, the author of Ecclesiastes, known as the Teacher, and generally assumed to be King Solomon, embarks on a project: He applies his mind, he tells us, to the task of searching out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. And having seen all the deeds that are under the sun, he concludes: All is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Not a particularly encouraging or uplifting statement, to say the least.

But something of a reality check.

For as the Teacher observes the extent of unrelieved human suffering and injustice in his world, as he observes the out-workings of greed and oppression at the hands of the powerful, he gives voice to a deep cynicism about the conduct of human affairs and what passes for conventional wisdom.

For all we human beings might take pride in our vast accumulation of knowledge and our acquisition of wisdom, if the fruits of our labours do nothing to ease suffering, to combat injustice, to restrain evil and to bring about a better world, then they amount to little more than vanity and a chasing after wind.

This sombre note, sounded first in Ecclesiastes, is amplified in our reading from Saint Paul's letter to the Church in Corinth, where the Apostle expounds the logic of the Cross, saying, it was in the crucifixion of Christ that the wisdom of God was revealed. "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise," Paul asserts, "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong."

That divine wisdom might be located in human weakness and vulnerability is a truly remarkable claim. It reorients our entire thinking around issues of power, and what constitutes foolishness and wisdom. At the very least it requires a posture of humility in our approach to the acquisition and application of knowledge, as well as in our dealings with one another.

For if divine wisdom is indeed located among the weak, the powerless, and those deemed foolish by the world's standards, then indifference towards their plight is not an option. Nor is collusion in systems that perpetuate their oppression. There is an ethical mandate to not only change those systems, but also to work towards healing and restoration for those who have been disadvantaged by them.

Moreover, associating the pursuit of wisdom with the virtue of humility has another important consequence, namely the willingness to value wisdom wherever it is found, not just in the long-established Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions, but also in a multiplicity of religious and cultural traditions, written and oral, indigenous and introduced. In our context of Aotearoa, this means that Māori tikanga, comprising story, whakatauki, customs, practices and protocols, is not incidental to the tasks of understanding wisdom and taking up the challenge of daring to be wise. It has a vital part to play.

He aha te mea nui o te ao. He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata. I still recall the first time I heard that well-known whakatauki and marveled at the wisdom it conveyed. What is the most important thing in the world? It is people, it is people, it is people.

So too the tikanga and whakatauki of other cultural traditions, and the scriptures and practices of other religious traditions. Wisdom, like truth, is perspectival, incremental and collaborative.

In the Book of Proverbs, another part of the Wisdom literature in the Hebrew scriptures, Wisdom is personified in the form of a woman standing on a street corner, at a busy intersection, calling out to people of all backgrounds and dispositions as they pass by on their daily business. Here we are given a picture of wisdom being located in the midst of diversity and the mundane, not among the elite and the rarefied.

Universities have a particular role to play in this regard.

Yes, a University is a centre of research, searching for solutions to the world's problems, of which there are many. And yes, a University is a centre of higher education, producing highly competent and qualified academics and professionals who will excel in their chosen fields.

But it is more than these things. It is, and must be, a centre of creativity, collaboration and discernment, standing at the crossroads of human endeavour, helping us to imagine, and to prepare for, a different kind of future and in so doing drawing on wisdom derived from multiple cultural streams, intellectual traditions and academic disciplines.

If one talks about the soul of a university, perhaps it is here where we come closest to understanding what that means. Gaining a university education is not just about satisfying course requirements and emerging with a Degree. It is about being shaped in many subtle and profound ways, and taking one's place in an academic community that sees the processes and ultimate outcomes of learning serving a higher good than personal success.

Those of us who were present at the University's Convocation Ceremony yesterday saw a graphic example of this when four graduates of this University were awarded honorary Doctorates, not just in recognition of their successes in their chosen fields of endeavour, but in recognition of the immense contributions they had made, and are making, to the betterment of our world.

To that end, there is much to be said for the collegiate University model, which in this country is unique to Otago University. Just seventeen years before the foundation of this University, Cardinal John Henry Newman, in his classic treatise *The Idea of a University*, argued that the

interaction between students is as vital a part of their liberal education as the instructions they receive from their professors. Newman, an Oxford man, was a strong advocate of residential colleges, precisely because of the opportunities for interaction they afforded at so many levels, including a rich exchange of ideas. A living teaching, he called it.

A living teaching ... a living tradition ... a living wisdom ... that is what we have here at Otago. A tradition dedicated to the acquisition of knowledge, certainly, but as our Motto reminds us, even more to the pursuit of wisdom.

Sapere Aude. Dare to be Wise.

To which we respond: *Audeamus,* We dare!