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The tough gig: Being salt and light¹

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Almost exactly two years ago, I was invited to speak at the Avondale Graduation for that year and had accepted. But unexpectedly, my wife was taken ill in late November and was dead by the 22nd of December. It was a very difficult time, but it was also a time in which life had a certain clarity. All sorts of things that had seemed important – the state of the house, the state of my finances, the state of my work – seemed suddenly far less significant. But relationships (with Beth, with my children, with our friends, with God), in those days and in the months that followed, became more and more clear. How important these were. It wasn't that I gave up on the house, or my finances or my work, but it was clear that they were secondary priorities. I was to invest in things that would last, in things that, when the going was tough, had really been revealed to matter. In short, I was to invest in love.

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Now a graduation is a marker of change in your life, and it is not bad at that point to ask precisely the question of priorities. What is your task and what is it that you are being called to do? In one sense that is easy. You have had an education that has prepared you for a specific career. At its best, that education has equipped you, not just with professional skills and with knowledge; the former you will constantly have to update, and the latter will very soon be out of date. At its best, that education has equipped you with an intellectual tool kit; with skills in critical thinking and in communication. You will have practised asking the hard questions; weighing evidence; and looking for answers in even counter-intuitive places. You will have learned how to defend your views, and to listen better to those of others. Those skills need practice, but they don't need updating, and they never go out of date, they are always in demand. I have no doubt that, with an Avondale education, you have those skills aplenty.

But the real question is the one of priorities; of how you are going to use those skills; of where your effort is going primarily to be expended. The real question is not which of the many possible career paths you will take, but *why* and *how*. Those are much more challenging questions, and ones

to which Jesus gives an answer in Matthew 5, the passage that you have chosen as a class. That passage asks whether your primary vocation is not to be a nurse, or a teacher, or a businessperson, or graphic designer, but whether it is to be salt and light to the world. You can't necessarily write that on your CV but the effort you put into being salt and light will be your greatest contribution.

Salt: it was a preservative in the ancient world. It made a difference by stopping things from going bad. Light: it reveals the truth and shows people the way to go. In the workplace, in the home, and in the community more generally, things should be better, relationships stronger, the truth more clearly seen, because you are living out your vocation to be salt and light to the world.

It's a tough gig the 'salt' and 'light' vocation. It requires a great deal to accept. In particular, it will require two things. First, it will require all those intellectual skills that you have been working on in your time at Avondale. I wonder if you remember the beginning of Romans 12. Paul writes "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." There is an old adage: "You are not what you think you are, but what you think, you are." What goes on in your mind really matters; it shapes how you behave and who you are. The implication of Paul's exhortation is that if you don't do anything, if you simply absorb the ideas and assumptions of the culture around you, then your mind will be conformed to this world. That is the default setting.

And we know how that happens. Most people accept ideas as true, or reject them as false, not because they have considered them in any depth, but because they are the product of what sociologists call 'plausibility structures': fundamental, untested beliefs that determine the plausibility of other beliefs without examination. These plausibility structures are constantly reinforced by, and help create the values present in, the television shows that we watch, the songs that we listen to, the things that we read, the common practices of our professions. Sometimes those beliefs have at one

¹Avondale College of Higher Education Graduation Address 2014

point been the product of academic argument; sometimes they have not. They almost always survive in the popular culture long after academic argument has rejected them.

But those who are called to be salt and light are called to use their minds differently. They are to 'be transformed'. Note the verb structure. It is a passive imperative. In other words, while transformation is principally the work of the Holy Spirit, we also have our role to play. We are to commit ourselves to 'being' transformed. We are to test the ideas around us, the assumptions of our profession, the norms that dominate the environments of our work and our communities, against our fundamental commitments to the truths of God. This is an active process. You have been given the tools for it at Avondale and you are not to waste them. As clinical decisions are made, as curricula are formed, as businesses are shaped, as designs are formulated, as government policy is made, we are constantly to be taking the values and priorities of the world around us and asking how these decisions might best be made in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And we are to use the skills of communication that you have honed here at Avondale to explain to the world, to demonstrate to the world, that there is a different way of thinking and living, a way that gives priority to relationship and ultimately to love, a way that reflects the character of our gracious Lord. That is indeed a 'tough gig', and it will require all your minds and the intellectual skills that you have learned.

But second, to be salt and light in the workplace and more generally, requires not only a tough and fine-tuned mind, it also requires soft and open hearts. I said at the outset that the thing, which became most important as Beth lay dying, and the thing that I valued most in many of the professionals with whom we dealt, was love. We valued the professional skill of the doctors and nurses, but the ones who really made an impact were the ones who also cared, for whom we were not just one more family with a dying relative, but were people of infinite importance. The hospital in which Beth died had a religious foundation and my most secular friends who live in its catchment area all really do believe that that makes an important difference. That which will bring salt to a situation at your work, that which will preserve it for good, that which will bring light, that which will reveal the character of God, is not only your ability to speak the truth into the situation into which you have been called, but your ability to treat your coworkers, your clients, your patients, your students, your bosses, your direct reports, as people of infinite value, people whom God has made and for whom Jesus died. One of the most ugly linguistic developments

in the contemporary workplace is that managers have come to speak of people as 'resources'. In planning sessions, people often say 'we will need a new resource to do this or that'. When they do, I sometimes quip, "You mean a person made in the image of God." It is a joke and people laugh. But it reminds me, who usually needs it most of all, that people are not functionaries serving a particular need, they are, as the Psalmist and the writer to the Hebrews both remind us, "creatures little lower than the angels" whom God loves with a love that took him to the cross. If that is right, then I too, who claim to serve him, am to treat them as walking miracles, and to seek their highest good. That was what we knew when Beth died. People matter. Love matters. Relationship matters. It is ontologically central: God has from all eternity been Father in self-giving love with Son in self-giving love with Spirit in self-giving love with Father. Our daily prayer should be that the Holy Spirit will give us the fragrance of that love as we hope to serve the people whom we meet and with whom we are in relationship.

So it is a matter of priorities. You today are being called upon to choose your vocation. You can choose to be just another nurse, teacher, public official or businessperson. You can choose a career for the financial rewards, or for the reputation it will bring. You can merely enjoy your work, or you can find it a slog. But there is another choice to be made. And that is the choice as to whether, whatever else you may be, and wherever you may serve, you are salt and light. That will require all the skills that you have. It will require tough minds and soft hearts. It will require the work of the Holy Spirit in your life as he empowers you to understand the world differently and to love with just a whiff of the love that binds the Trinity. It will require a constant recommitment to God and to the people whom he has called you to serve. It will be costly. But if you do that, you will really be salt to preserve the good, and a lighted city set on a hill. You will make a difference that people will remember.

My late wife had made that choice and it impacted not only the way that she lived, but also on the way that she died. The staff of the hospital were quite overwhelmed by her peace and kindness to them in facing death. Salt and light: it makes a difference. What is your choice today? Will you accept the graduation challenge that in choosing Matthew 5 you have set for yourself? Will you be salt that preserves the God, and light through which people come to see the Father heart of God? It is my prayer as you graduate today that you will accept that vocation and that it will shape the rest of your careers, that it will shape the rest of your lives. **TEACH**

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