

The Hon. John Dowd AO QC, Chancellor
Professor Peter Lee, Vice Chancellor
Mr Trevor Wilson, Deputy Chancellor
Graduands of Southern Cross University
Parents, family and friends of graduands

May I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and pay my respect to elders past and present.

Graduations are a most happy occasion. I know this, as I have myself have had more than one. I have often joked that the nine years I spent as a student at university were because I enjoyed graduating so much.

To the graduands today, I imagine that you are feeling gratification; those of you who are family and friends of graduands are, no doubt, swelling with pride. In these respects, graduations can resemble a triumph.

In our common usage, a triumph means a success. But in ancient times, a triumph referred to the public celebration that the Romans would have to welcome a general and his army after a conquest or victorious campaign. Rome's citizen army would parade through the city, following an ancient route, marching past temples to the gods with great fanfare, as they showed off captured loot and defeated kings.

Leading it all would be the general in his chariot, a wreath held over his head, and draped in the robes of a god. But in his moment of glory, the general would have standing behind him a slave, who would whisper in his ear – over and over again, as he absorbed the adulation of Roman citizens – “Remember you are a mortal.”

Humility in triumph was something that the ancients believed was important. Our current age, at least in my view, doesn't always remember the need for humility as well as it should. Particularly in our digital world, we can tend to err on the side of disclosure rather than discretion. There are fewer and fewer things that we keep only to ourselves, and when we celebrate our successes it can often err on the side of over-the-top. We have got to the point where humility is now commonly invoked as in the form of indirect boasting – as in the so-called practice of the “humblebrag”, when someone can artfully bring up their achievements in the form of artificial self-deprecation.

Today, like the slave whispering in the ear of the general, I would like to say a little about the importance of remembering our limits and of practicing moderation in our lives. I say this not to dampen any joy today, but because I believe that humility is one virtue required for human flourishing. It is a quality that is required not only for us to improve ourselves, but also for us to treat others well.

If you will indulge me, when I reflect upon my own work in the area of racial discrimination and human rights, this is one point to which I increasingly return. Namely, while racism can be born of fear and

hate, it can also be born of ignorance and arrogance. Let me explain what I mean by this, and of the connection with being humble.

Many, for instance, continue to believe that racism refers only to behavior connected to a belief in racial superiority. And yet, words or actions can have a racist effect even if they are not accompanied by nasty intent. This is the case with so-called casual racism, where someone can make something like a throwaway comment but which has the effect of denigrating or humiliating another because of their race. What one person may regard as harmless may in fact inflict some harm on another.

Last year, we saw a powerful illustration of this with the case of AFL footballer Adam Goodes and media personality Eddie McGuire. As many of you know, Goodes – an Aboriginal man – had been called an “ape” by a young spectator at a match in Melbourne. A few days later, McGuire would jokingly refer to Goodes promoting the film King Kong. McGuire, I believe, did not intend to say something racist in likening Goodes to King Kong. But yet the effect remained the same. Racism, after all, is as much about impact as it is about intention.

One major challenge with my role on the issue of racism is getting Australians to reflect on their attitudes and behavior. This is by no means an easy thing. Often, the problem with prejudice and discrimination doesn't involve people who are evil or heinous. It can involve people who may have every good intention, who may be good people – it may just be that their way of talking to or

treating others may not always result in people being treated fairly. But how can people come to change their ways, if they don't even see that there is a problem in the first place? In the case of racism, it is frequently the case that what some regard as prejudice or discrimination, others regard as humour or part of free speech.

This is where something like humility comes into the picture. Because for there to be recognition that one may be in the wrong, even when one doesn't necessarily mean to be, there must first be humility. Someone must be willing to acknowledge that their current ways may not necessarily be right or the best. This is what I mean when I say that prejudice can be born of arrogance as well as ignorance. As the philosopher Henri-Frederic Amiel wrote, "there is no respect for others without humility in one's self".

All this frequently overlaps with another challenge: one of empathy. A failure to understand the impact of one's behavior often reflects an inability to see things from the perspective of another. This can often be true of those who should know better: often it can be the strong and intelligent who can lack the most empathy. When it concerns racism, there is the common problem of those in positions of social privilege who can dismiss or underestimate the harm of discrimination as exaggerated complaints – or who fail to understand that the power that they might enjoy may not necessarily be exercised by those less powerful. When it comes to empathy, it means very little if one cannot express compassion for those who are weak or vulnerable.

Today, to the graduands, you come to the formal completion of your degree. For some of you, there may well be further study. For others, this will be the culmination of your education. Whichever category you belong to, education in its truest sense will always be ongoing. And it will be as much about sentiment as it is about knowledge. Education is nothing if not about the cultivation of character; about the expansion of one's thinking, the challenging of one's ability, the examination of one's values. But it begins with the humble acknowledgement that however much we may know, there remains much that we do not know.

It may, as I have said, seem out of step with the times to stress humility as a virtue. Yet in a world where everything is happening faster, when everything has grown complex, when everyone it seems has an expert opinion, sometimes the most enlightened course is to suspend our judgment and accept our imperfection. Because sometimes there can be nothing worse than trying to transcend our limits, for we then forget what it means to be human.

To all of you graduating today, and to all your families, you have my warmest congratulations. I am honoured to be with you to celebrate your triumph. I wish you all the very best in your endeavours. May you enjoy every success and happiness.