Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen, graduands. It is my great honour to congratulate you, the graduands, on your achievements that are celebrated here tonight in this ceremony. Not only do these degrees allow you to claim that you know something nor are they only tickets to whatever comes next in your life; they are also evidence that you have been able to live for an extended time under a discipline imposed by people recognised as knowledgeable in the subjects you have studied and skilled in educational method. The length of time is important, because it assures us, the public, that you have been habituated in body, soul and mind to act as human beings for whom excellence is a pleasure. In other words, you have become people of wide-ranging virtue, both moral and intellectual, and it is on people like you that both country and church call to make our communal life as good as possible.

I also congratulate the faculty of Good Shepherd College and all those associated with it in support, leadership and the provision of resources, because it is you who have made these achievements possible. Families and friends also contribute greatly to the life of scholarship both in making the conditions for study available and in forgoing criticism when students are preoccupied by thoughts distant from immediate concerns or stressed by the demands of essays and exams. For you, too, this is a night of rejoicing as you recognise the achievement of your graduands.

I bring you greetings and congratulations from your colleagues in Sydney, both at Catholic Institute of Sydney and Sydney College of Divinity. We are glad of the relationship between our colleges and feel that we are the better for it, especially when we are able to meet one another.

I wish tonight to draw some thoughts from Aristotle’s often-neglected teaching on slavery, which can be found in his Politics Book One, Chapters 3 – 7. It is sometimes described, even by scholars, as notorious. Why this is so can be easily imagined, if we read the conclusion to Chapter 5, where Aristotle says the following. ‘That some persons are free and others slaves by nature, therefore, and that for these slavery is both advantageous and just, is evident’. (1255a1-2) Aristotle’s position is that people who are not capable of successfully planning their own future are better off labouring under the direction of a person who can plan for the future. I do not want so much to defend this position, although an attempt might be enjoyable, as to draw out two key distinctions that Aristotle was making in these chapters.

Before I can proceed, I need to clear away some baggage. To begin with, Aristotle rejected most forms of slavery, such as enslavement of prisoners taken in war, which he called violent slavery. The scope of his claims was very narrow. Further, he was not talking about the kind of slavery that was experienced from about the 17th century, when modes of living and understandings of the nature of property changed in such ways that persons came to be regarded as alienable property, something like coin, and households became places too small to care for those who were not intimate. His interest was in largish rural households, in which everyone, family and labourers together, attained a reasonable living. To rid us of this baggage, I will talk not of slaves but of servants, which is a better translation of what Aristotle actually meant. What then are the two distinctions that I wish to explore?

The first distinction is that between those who are readily capable of foresight and deliberation and those who are not. The second distinction is between two kinds of rule or governance, the rule of master over servant and the rule of politician or statesperson over citizen. Let me begin with the first.

Aristotle makes no apology for suggesting that some people are more readily capable than others of judging just how things are and what the future might hold and then of thoughtfully considering the options for present action and choosing the most appropriate course. We are, indeed, talking about practical wisdom, and the prudent person is one who acts consistently in this way. This capability is built both on a natural aptitude and on habituation or repeated practice. Nor does Aristotle make any apology for suggesting that there are other people who lack this capability, no doubt in
varying degrees, either because they have not had the opportunity to develop the aptitude or, more significantly, because the potential in the person was not very great in the first place.

Our modern world does not take easily to this distinction or to the understanding of human nature that underlies it. In its strongest form, the modern world takes human beings to be individuals essentially indistinguishable from one another and equal in worth and ability. It is assumed that if equal opportunity is offered to all, each individual has the same chance of making a success of life. This view, as we see in Thomas Hobbes (*Leviathan*, Chapters 3 – 5), takes reason to be nothing more than a series of calculations that can be speeded up or extended in length, but which are otherwise qualitatively indistinguishable. In principle, it would seem that anybody can be trained to calculate longer and quicker.

These are some of the assumptions behind the kind of liberal democracy in which we live in countries like New Zealand, Australia, Britain and the United States. It is a way of life that has generated enormous economic growth and enabled the clever and energetic to prosper irrespective of the circumstances of their birth. Yet for all its great successes, liberal democracy has its failures. It is in countries like ours that one finds people who are destitute though living in the midst of great wealth, and sometimes the response given to these people is harsh. I think I can say that in Australia at the present moment, our Federal Government in its welfare reforms acts as if it assumes that all of those who are destitute or in difficulty are that way largely through their own fault.

For much of this year, I have been travelling and working in the Pacific. I have been startled when thoughtful people in countries as diverse as Bougainville, Vanuatu and Tonga have said to me that there are no poor people in their countries. Even in war-ravaged Bougainville, I was corrected by a group of eminent people who insisted that despite the difficulties of those islands, nobody was without right to fertile land or without family attachment and support. Now, poverty is a complex concept and can be assessed in different ways, but if one takes it to mean destitution, the claims are largely true of these places. In contrast, those Pacific people who have travelled to the United States often mention being shocked at seeing human beings sleeping in cardboard boxes surrounded by snow on the streets of Washington DC, the capital of the world’s richest country.

During my travel, it has also struck me that, in order to live successfully in village communities or on small islands, one needs people of great practical wisdom. These communities live on their own resources and must contend with the variations of nature and the volatility of human passions. It takes careful judgement to make it all work, and not everybody is capable of this. This is, I believe, what Aristotle saw when he made the distinction between those who are readily capable of foresight and deliberation and those who are not.

The second distinction has to do with how communities are able to act together, that is, with rule or governance. The distinction is between the rule of master over servant and the rule of statesperson over citizen. This I understand to be the fundamental distinction of the *Politics*. The rule of master over servant is the rule of one who deliberates over one who obeys and labours. The rule of statesperson over citizen is the rule of one who deliberates over one who is also capable of deliberating and who acts freely. This kind of rule is seen best when citizens take turns to rule or to lead and when all are capable of both ruling and being ruled. It involves vigorous human interaction.

Aristotle’s interest is with the second kind of relationship, in which human beings who can exercise reason and who can speak are able to engage with one another in constantly inventive ways. It is what he calls political life, which is life beyond family and village and also beyond the necessities of the daily struggle for existence. It is the life of free human beings who are able to excel in thought and word as they resolve their common difficulties and forge their common destiny. It is not that the relationship of master and servant is left behind. It is always present, particularly in the area of labouring for food and shelter, and human beings tend to lapse into this relationship, especially if their leaders are strong or confident or even successful. But what the *Politics* is about is finding ways, in which human beings can exercise their freedom and use their minds, so as to engage in a life that is more than that of brute animals.

In our modern world, it is less easy to find the space for human action that Aristotle found in the political life of the city-state. Our societies are very large, so that the people in them cannot all know each other. We are beholden to technology and hence to the technicians who run it. When our computers break down we do not try to reason with them or to persuade them to function properly; rather, we call experts and meekly do what they tell us to do. Even more significantly, our countries are largely focussed on economic goals rather than on moral, intellectual or political goals to the extent that we talk about ‘the economy’ as if it were an entity in its own right rather than a human activity directed at sustenance. Such concentration on economy places us in the sphere of physical necessity and leaves us prone to mastery. All of this raises questions about whether our political life is indeed political life in the sense that Aristotle...
meant, namely, the flowering of human achievement as persons deliberate and judge together.

I suspect that life is often not much better in the workplace, especially in large corporations. It was John Locke, the articulator of much of what the modern world is about, who said that ‘a freeman makes himself a servant to another, by selling him, for a certain time, the service he undertakes to do, in exchange for the wages he is to receive’. (*Second Treatise*, Chapter VII, n. 85.) In other words, Locke suggests that the relationships in a corporation are of master and servant, even if we call it ‘management’. I suspect that this is a clue to the root cause of some of the excesses of large corporations. The high rates of remuneration and special privileges of executives are often justified on the basis of those people being paid what they are worth. Yet, is one person worth one hundred times more than what another person in the same corporation is worth? If we assume that those executives are persons capable of deliberation who yet live as servants rather than as free agents, we can understand why they might demand such high remuneration. It is compensation for an irksome limitation of their human potential.

What all of this suggests is that Aristotle’s two distinctions are still very much alive and that they have a relevance today, albeit one that is different to that which they had in his time. There are those in our society who are less able to look after themselves. Our graduands will have a role in assisting them to successfully negotiate life’s difficult moments and to recover from its disasters. They will also have a role of advocacy in the community in the spirit of Proverbs (31: 8 – 9), where it says, ‘Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy’.

In view of the second distinction, our society does have difficulty in maintaining the space in which human beings have opportunity to freely exercise their gifts of mind and spirit. Our graduands will have a role in fostering smaller communities in which these gifts can be exercised. Although leaders in the Church are not exempt from the tendency to dominate, our understanding of the Church as a communion or *koinonia* bespeaks not a community of servants but rather a community of those blessed with many gifts that are exercised in the community. This should be pursued, not in the cause of efficiency but in the name of the Gospel, so that all will experience the fullness of the words, ‘the truth will set you free’. (John 8: 32)

And so, Graduands, I wish you well. Congratulations on your achievements and every blessing on your lives as you step out now to live in the ways that your education has made possible.

END

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