

May 6, 2013 VST Convocation Address
The Most Rev. John E. Privett

Elder Harriet Cooke, Elder Louise Dangeli, Board Chair Heather Clarke, Chancellor Peter Elliot, Members of the Board of Governors, Past Principal Wendy Fletcher, Acting Principal Stephen Farris, Principal Designate Richard Topping, Honoured Guests, Faculty, Graduates, Families and Friends, - it is an honour and a joy to address you tonight.

As I do so, I am conscious of the remarks of Dr. George Cooper speaking to graduates of Kings University in Halifax a few years ago, “Convocation speakers should think of themselves as the dead body at an old fashioned Irish wake. They need you in order to have the party, but no one expects you to say very much!” But, to quote Monty Python, I’m not dead yet - so indulge me with time for a few words!

This is first and foremost a celebration of significant accomplishment. It is the culmination of a lot of time and a great deal of personal energy. Theological education when undertaken seriously makes its demands upon our whole selves – it is a task of mind, of heart and of soul. And so we are here tonight to honour the 2013 graduates of the Vancouver School of Theology. Congratulations to each of you! We celebrate with you and with your friends and families who have walked alongside you, struggled with you, prayed with you and watched you grow through the years of study that have brought you to this day.

We also acknowledge and express our admiration and appreciation to the faculty and staff who have guided each student through their course of studies, and supported each of them in this educational journey at VST. Dr. Dwayne Huebner, professor emeritus at both Yale Divinity School and Columbia University, has written that the journey of education is essentially a transcendent journey. Using the words of the great Shema, which we hear in the gospels as the great commandment, Huebner says that the movement of education is a movement that always draws us out of ourselves. “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind.” He goes on to say that God is the holy other, and when we love the other with our whole heart, and mind and strength, we are drawn out of ourselves and so are brought to a new place. That kind of loving is a transcendent activity. When we love the subject of our studies, when we love our community of learning, when we love our church and ultimately love the mystery and the revelation of God then we are moved from where we started and come to find ourselves drawn to a new place of understanding. That is the educational journey, and it is never restricted to a purely intellectual

activity. I have no doubt that those of you who have engaged in theological studies know personally and deeply what that experience is about. You are not the people you were when you arrived. You have been stretched and challenged and now you are ready to leave this place of learning for new places where you will continue to learn and grow.

Today in the Christian calendar is a festival day honouring St. John the Evangelist and the legacy of his gospel community. It is a day for saints and for those who continue to carry the gospel in our time and place. Dare I say it is a day for newly minted theologians as well? In the tradition of the western church, today is also one of the Rogation days. For many centuries the three days before Ascension Day were kept as special times of prayer for the seeds about to be sown in the fields. In agricultural communities, some churches have special services for the blessing of seeds and animals at the beginning of the planting season. I remember hearing about Rogation days for the first time as a young priest on the prairies. A friend told me he had held a rogation service for the congregation on a farm in his community. When I asked him what he did for the service, he said, "I walked around the farm and blessed everything that moved!" The blessing of seeds and animals takes different forms in different places at different times, depending on geography and climate. A few years ago in the Okanagan I had the privilege of blessing a newly planted vineyard. We read scripture, sang songs, and walked through the rows of small, fragile grape vines. We prayed for the growth of these tender plants and for the well-being of the workers in the vineyard. That sounds almost biblical doesn't it? The readings which we hear tonight are those suggested for a Rogation service.

They are particularly appropriate for convocation I think, because tonight we celebrate the seeds that have been planted in minds and hearts and souls. I am very aware that the root meaning of the word "seminary" is "seed plot". The seeds of study at VST have found fertile soil and those seeds will continue to grow with you and within you for the rest of your lives. Some have already grown strong and full, and others will take many years to come to fruition. May God continue to bless the seeds that have been sown so that they may bear fruit in your lives and in the lives of those you are called to serve.

As we gather tonight, I am deeply conscious that as you complete your studies at VST the landscape of the world is vastly different that it was only a few short years ago. Our world seems as if it is becoming more fragmented and we have lost a sense of the grand narratives that guide and unify us. The place of religious faith is not the same as it once was and the role of the church and other faith communities has changed significantly. There is continuing interest in spiritual matters but the historic religious traditions have less appeal, in part, I think because we have not told our stories well. We may

have in many cases lost our focus. I have had conversations with clergy who no longer seem to know what the main focus of their ministry is. We are facing a collective amnesia about our own deep spiritual traditions and the wealth that lies hidden there. Many long time members of our congregations are not very clear about where the heart of our faith lies. I am aware that fewer and fewer congregations have the kind of stability that they had a generation ago and that the task of congregational leadership is becoming more critical and more demanding. Congregations face the challenge of maintaining their common life, while also discovering the need for learning how to speak of the gospel in a less than receptive environment. And before that can happen we often face the task of teaching or re-teaching the very basics of Christian faith and life. Whether one offers ones leadership as an ordained person or as an active lay person, our faith communities need you. There is critically important work to be done by those ready to take up the challenge.

In our reading from the book Deuteronomy, we hear what is, perhaps, the oldest creed in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is part of the harvest ritual associated with the Festival of Weeks. When the June harvest comes, the Israelite is commanded to take the first fruits of the harvest to the priest and offer it to God in thanksgiving for the land and for all that God has given including the gifts of freedom and Torah. And then the ancient story of God's saving activity is recited: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down to Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing harsh labour on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors...The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm...and he brought us to this place...*So now I bring you the first fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.*"(Deut. 26:5-10) So now I bring you the first fruits of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." Many seeds have been sown throughout your studies at VST. You have learned much, much has taken root, and now the time has come to ask what you will do with what you have received in this land of theological study. What first fruits will you gather in your basket to offer in thanksgiving for all that God has done? Will you tell the story of your ancestors in faith? Will you offer your gifts to the faith communities that need your leadership; will you offer your knowledge and most of all your faithfulness? Will you live among the people to whom you are called, will you learn from them and together with them help them to discover the riches of this land of faith, a land flowing with milk and honey and with the gift of finest wheat? The gospel for Rogation is the story in John's gospel of Jesus' encounter with the crowds who have come in search of him. And he reminds them that the fruits of the land are a great blessing, but there is an even greater gift – "...the bread of

God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” And when they ask him for this bread, Jesus replies, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:35) The Risen Christ still offers that assurance.

Your education, your knowledge, and your learning are needed in our faith communities, but even more important is your knowledge of God, your love for Jesus, your heart for the church and your own discovery of the bread which gives life to the world. Human beings long for that bread which gives life to the world. Faithful people in our congregations have tasted and long to be nourished with that bread of life so that rather than struggle to survive, they may thrive and be a light to the world. The offering of the first fruits of what you have been given is a sacred gift to God, to the church and to the world. Much has been given – much will be required.

So tonight we celebrate – we celebrate these hardworking and ripening graduates and the seed bed that is the Vancouver School of Theology. We celebrate what God has given and what God continues to give. We celebrate the hope that you give to us, to Christ’s Church and to the world. And we pray that the seeds that have been sown in you may bear much fruit. God bless each of you and the ministries to which you are called.