

**Installation of new Vice Chancellor
Professor Robert Warner
University of SS Mark & John, Plymouth**

**Marjon
3 July 2017 at 5.30pm**

Jeremiah 29.4-17

It's good to be together this afternoon as we officially install Professor Rob Warner as Vice Chancellor and seek God's blessing on him and on the university as it moves into the next chapter of its life.

From my conversations with Rob over recent months, I know that he is keen to get out and about, to know and be known in and beyond the university campus.

The first 100 days are critical in all jobs and Rob does not hesitate to grasp nettles. Nor does he let the grass grow under his feet, but has already been busy meeting up with those engaged in education, healthcare, sport and industry, not only here in Devon and Cornwall, but further afield.

As the university's ambassador and vice chancellor, I know he wants to foster strong and creative partnerships between the university, city and diocese, and to renew a sense of shared enterprise among staff and students.

All this is welcome news. So we salute him today as he gets into his stride, and assure him of our glad and generous support.

If I had a text for today's ceremony it would be E. M. Forster's words, 'Only connect'. The power of that epigraph, which Forster set at the front of his novel *Howard's End*, is undiminished. His words sound deceptively simple, as phrases from great literature invariably do, but they invite exploration.

The dictionary defines the word 'connect' in relation to 'a body or society held together by a bond, ligaments, membranes or cartilages; the things that give a body coherence'. And then for good measure it adds, 'connect: to associate with others in relationship; to enable two or more people to come together and unite'.

The task of a Vice Chancellor is indeed to 'connect': to bring coherence to the competing agendas and energies of this institution; to provide a sense of direction; to ensure that the ligaments of good governance and the membranes of healthy relationships hold this university together so that all may flourish.

Which is why delivering high quality teaching and research in a creative learning environment will be high on Rob's list of priorities. Marjon is rightly focused on student success, and that embraces both academic achievement and personal well-being.

'Only connect'. And today there are other connections we need to make: connections with the south-west region; connections with the city of Plymouth; connections with the story of this university and its Christian foundation which are about Marjon's special character; and connections with the future as the university seeks to serve the region and position itself in the changing landscape of higher education.

The University of St Mark and St John, to give it its full title, was founded by the Church of England in the 19th century to train teachers for its network of church schools serving the burgeoning population of England. Our modern buildings here in Plymouth disguise the fact that Marjon is the oldest teacher training institution in the country, and this is something of which we should be proud.

The Church was and is passionate about education because it is about enabling children and young people to attain their full potential. As Jesus says in the Gospel, 'I have come that you may have life, and have it in all its fullness.' Learning is a life-long enterprise, and this university seeks to embody that vision.

We live in an age deluged with data. Some of us struggle to make sense of the mass of information and some organizations end up paralysed by it. And here is the catch. It is all too easy to confuse the acquisition of information with the search for wisdom.

In the words of the poet and critic T.S. Eliot:
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

In an age of obsessive data collection, what I hope Marjon will champion is the pursuit of wisdom, to help its students recover the 'life we have lost in living'.

And in this enterprise we each have something to contribute, whatever our faith or lack of it, as together we grapple with the questions of human striving and failure, and how we can build supportive, sustainable communities in a global world.

Only connect. And what of the future?

For our reading from the Bible today Rob chose a passage from the prophet Jeremiah. Some caricature Jeremiah as an Eeyore figure, full of gloom and doom, but in truth his words breathed life and hope to his beleaguered contemporaries: 'I know the plans that I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope'. (Jeremiah 29.11)

Jeremiah lived at a time of massive political upheaval. The country we know today as Iraq dominated the region. Its armies had conquered as far as China and India in the east, Egypt to the west, and Greece to the north-west. Its capital was Babylon, a name which has entered the lexicon of

human suffering as a cypher for tyranny and oppression.

Visit the Assyrian gallery at the British Museum in London and you get a sense of the might of this ancient empire. The Assyrians were intolerant of opposition and, in the case of Israel and the Jews, executed their king and the Jewish royal family, and razed the temple in Jerusalem to the ground. Whole sections of the Jewish population, including the civil service, were deported to Babylon. The scale of the calamity was enormous.

And to his despairing compatriots Jeremiah spoke words of wisdom and hope. 'Seek the welfare of the city to which you are taken,' he advised, because 'I know the plans that I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope'.

And Jeremiah's words proved true. The exiles returned from Babylon and Jerusalem was rebuilt, though few at the time imagined that such a turn-around was possible.

Only connect. Today is a day for connecting with the city of Plymouth in which this university is set. Connecting with the words of Jeremiah because they speak to us of God's guidance and wisdom. They direct our gaze to the future and to where we are going, not simply at the past and where we have come from.

They articulate an authentic Christian hope in an age of change that counters the dominant cultural assumption that relegates faith to the status of a heritage theme park.

No one underestimates the challenges confronting universities at this time, including Marjon, but the story of this university and the way over the years it has successfully responded to various challenges, and learned to trim its sails in response to a change in wind direction, gives me grounds for confidence.

I conclude with words of the Slovenian theologian, Peter Kuzmic:

'Hope is the ability to hear the music of the future, and faith is the courage to dance to it today.'

As a new chapter in the life of Marjon unfurls and as Professor Rob Warner is installed as Vice Chancellor, we pray that God will him the grace if not exactly to dance to the music of the future, then certainly to lead this university with confidence and with joy.

+Robert Exon