

IBI Graduation 2010, 3pm Saturday 25th September.

1Corinthians 11 v 23 "For I received of the Lord what I also passed on to you"

It has been a great privilege to be associated with IBI since its inception; firstly as the principal of the sister college in the north, then as external examiner for its courses for 4 years. I admire the college very much, what it is seeking to do here in Ireland, and its outstanding staff. So, thank you for the invitation to speak today at your graduation.

Of course, I want mainly to address the students this afternoon, and especially those who are graduating. You are at a key moment in your lives; in a way, it is a liminal moment, a moment of thresholds, an "in between" moment, your life is turning around this point. You stand between the past – the IBI course you have successfully finished – and the future, and what the future will hold for you in terms of ministry.

What links the past with the future for you ? I want to say that it is the very idea of ministry, which is captured so well by Paul in 1Cor. 11:23. You know it well, it is the opening line of the well known passage on the Lord's supper "I have received of the Lord what I also passed on to you". Ministry is passing on to others what you have heard from the Lord. You do not originate the concept or the contents of your ministry, you receive it and you pass it on. You receive it from the Lord, though usually through others, and in ministry, you pass it on. It is a good definition of ministry.

Now, this is for us at the moment, here at graduation, a particular pivot between receiving and passing on. You have received from the Lord via IBI, many things, and these are things you should pass on in ministry.

Here is my thesis. IBI is a rather special place. It is not perfect, maybe you thought so when you first came, maybe you thought you had arrived in heaven, but you were soon disabused of that idea, IBI is not perfect but it is prophetic. It speaks of how ministry should be, that is what you have received, a view of the characteristics of good ministry from IBI, in all its weakness but in all its prophetic nature. Of course you have received content - doctrine, exegesis, understanding, but above all that, you have received attitudes here at IBI which should be carried into your ministry and passed on. Let us look at just four of these.

1. The first thing you have received of the Lord through IBI is the importance of hard thinking.

Elton Trueblood once said that the missionary has many duties but the first one is to think. That is true of all in ministry and whatever kind of ministry. For three reasons.

Firstly because the Word of God only opens all its treasures to hard thinking. Not all scripture is clear, careful scholarship opens the lid of the treasure chest.

Secondly, because this messy world requires more than sticky plaster solutions. If a man breaks a leg, you do not put a sticky plaster over it, but our preachers often do something similar every Sunday in the pulpits. Are you unemployed? Jesus is the answer. Are you troubled by postmodernity? Jesus is the answer, are you depressed? Jesus is the answer. I don't for one minute doubt the comprehensive all powerful efficacy of Jesus in our lives but we need deep understanding of the issues to know how to make Jesus the answer. Ministry is matching a profound knowledge of

the Word with a profound knowledge of the world we want it to speak into. IBI's concentration upon understanding contemporary Irish culture has done that well.

Thirdly, hard thinking is important above all because it is nothing less than part of our worship of God. It is to love the Lord our God with all our mind as well as our heart and our strength.

So this is my first point, this is one of the things in which IBI is prophetic if not perfect, one of the things which you have received of the Lord through IBI, the importance of hard thinking. Carry that into your ministry and pass it on to others in the churches. Don't love the Lord with all your mind while at IBI and then forget to make good hard intellectual work the basis for your ministry when you have left. Hermeneutics is not just for IBI, it is for life.

2. The second thing you have received of the Lord through IBI is the importance of good Christian Community.

IBI is inter-denominational and operates on a clear rule, that there are fundamentals, essentials of the gospel, which, as Tozer says, are blessedly few, and there are secondary issues of faith and practice on which we may differ, which may well form the basis of friendly discussion but which will not cause us to break fellowship with each other. This is not true of the churches as a whole, where, often as not, in order to be a member in good standing of a local church you have to believe in the resurrection of Jesus and a particular form of church government, or the cross and a particular view on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, or have to dress in a certain way, or not do this or that. Many of us come from churches which have so drawn the lines on secondary issues that people who are certainly members of our Lord's church cannot be full members of our church, so we have become more picky, more excluding than Jesus.

Once again, IBI is not perfect but in this respect, it is prophetic. This is something you have received from the Lord through IBI and we need to pass on to a sadly divided church.

But community is much more than this and, from what I have seen, IBI has created a sort of happy safe community in the college. Studies have been done as to what was the most influential thing about their Bible or theological college experience for students. Unfortunately what comes out top consistently is not the lectures or the principal but the experience of community and its relationships. What you have received from IBI is a community which is high on acceptance, a safe place to explore and make mistakes, a place where sins are forgiven, a place of common purpose and prayer, a place of gentleness more than authority. The staff have created this and it is something you have to create in your churches and organisations. It is something you have received from IBI and which you must also pass on to the wider church of Christ you will serve.

3. You have received of the Lord via IBI, that your spiritual life is central and essential to your ministry. In this too, IBI is not perfect but certainly prophetic.

You have learnt that people with large heads but shrivelled hearts are no use to the Lord; that 90% in Greek exegesis but 10% in self-denial is the wrong way round and a disaster for the church, however important Greek exegesis may be.

Having been at IBI, you know that you cannot even do Bible study without the Spirit in the heart to guide you and give you wisdom, otherwise it is like taking apart the piano to understand a Chopin

waltz. You never get to the deep meaning, the actual music for the Word. You will know that what you are before God will determine the shape of your ministry. One of my favourite quote which I generally use to begin my lectures on Doctrine comes from Thomas A Kempis the Imitation of Christ "Of what use is it to be able to discourse learnedly on the trinity if you lack humility and so displease the trinity?" You need to guard the fire within, the relationship with God if you are to do ministry.

There were two lecturers at my old college when I was a student who affected me and my future ministry deeply. I am happy to say their names today and honour them. One was an Irishman, Dr Dermot McDonald, the other was an Englishman John Balchin. Do I remember what they said ? Yes, and profited greatly by it. Do I remember who they were and what their lives meant and how they brought together their scholarship and their love ? Immensely and deeply. That is ministry. What you have received of the Lord through IBI, pass on to others.

4. Lastly, what you have received from IBI is that the great purpose of the Christian is to serve God with his or her life.

In the college I ran for some years, we once had a debate about what we should look for in those who apply to us to become students. Of course, we needed to look at academic qualifications for the courses, whether they were Christians and so on. Beyond that we decided to look for a strong desire in applicants to serve God with their life. I believe that is also the attitude of IBI. It has shown you this from church history, it has spoken of it in lectures on the spiritual life, it has challenged you to it in devotionals and given you examples in mission classes. Nobody disagrees that in the beginning was the word, but it is also true that in the end has to be the deed. You came to IBI not to stay and enjoy but in order to leave and do.

There is a very moving passage in the diary of David Livingstone as he was about to set out on his first great missionary journey. It says something like this "Lord I have done nothing for you yet and I long to do something for you" I remember how I felt when I read that first and determined to do something for God with my life.

I have been a teacher in theological education for about 30 years now and have seen many students go through college. There are always some who talk a great deal about the Lord and what they will do for him and they sometimes end up living their lives as individuals and couples just the same way as individuals and couples live their lives in this world. And some have not been so good at the talk but have quietly gone out to the most difficult places in the world, Cambodia, Afghanistan, inner city Birmingham, or the smallest churches in messy situations and have done something beautiful for God with their lives. It is often even more difficult to serve God with our lives in comfortable countries and easy situations. It applies to wherever we are guided to work.

If after all the complicated study and all the essays and the robes and certificates, we still want above all simply to serve God with our lives, IBI has done its job.

So here we are standing at the end of something, and at the beginning of something new and the big question to answer is "What is Christian ministry?" The answer from the apostle Paul is that it is to receive of the Lord what you will also deliver to others. What have you received from the lord through IBI?

One; The fundamental nature of hard thinking for the Christian servant

Two; The crucial importance of creating good, accepting, safe Christian community

Three; The knowledge that your spiritual life is central to your usefulness for God

And Four; that your great purpose is to serve God with your life.

So allow IBI to be prophetic in your life and carry these things into your ministry for the lord.