The French philosopher Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) once said, “I will not take you into a strange country, but I will perhaps teach you that you are a stranger in your own country.” If we are too much the stranger, we will not engage those in our midst; if we are too at home, we will lose that edge which marks us out as people with a mission.

We were privileged to have Joan Hendricks welcome us to country this morning. In that very gesture of welcome we are made more at home while being reminded that we are newcomers, strangers to so much that is ancient and eternally familiar in this land.

Last Sunday, we marked the end of NAIDOC week in Sydney with masses at La Perouse and Lavender Bay. In the morning at La Perouse, Elsie Heiss, the local convenor of the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry welcomed us all to the Church of Reconciliation. That evening she crossed the Harbour Bridge and preached at the middle class parish Lavender Bay. The parishioners extended her a very warm welcome, hanging on her every word. At the conclusion of mass, she invited the parishioners also to make their own bridge crossing and attend the monthly mass at the Reconciliation Church. The circle of engagement and mission was complete.

On Tuesday, we marked the 90th birthday of Edward Gough Whitlam. I was privileged to attend one of the many celebrations in Sydney. I was able to tell Gough that I had dined the previous month with his fellow nonagenarian Bishop Aloysius Jun SJ, bishop of Shanghai who spent 27 years in detention. When I had sat down to dinner in Shanghai, the bishop’s first question was: “How is Mr Whitlam?” He went on to tell me that Mr Whitlam “is a great friend of mine and a friend of China.” Gough was delighted to receive news of the ageing bishop. He told me: “In the days I used to meet with him, he had to negotiate with the Vatican through the apostolic pronuncio in Brussels.” This Jin-Whitlam relationship spoke to me of engagement and mission in a contemporary world. We need to be able to connect with the one who is so other, across boundaries.

How are we to do this as a university? Much has changed since I was an undergraduate here in Brisbane in the Whitlam era. This morning I passed Lang Park and saw large neon signs advertising parking restrictions for tomorrow night’s rugby clash between the Wallabies and the Springboks. Today marks the 35th anniversary of the commencement of the state of emergency proclaimed by Sir Joh Bjelke Petersen during the 1971 Springbok Rugby tour. The anti-apartheid protesters were to be given short shrift. I was one of the legal observers at those demonstrations outside the Tower Mill Motel. A year ahead of me were male students facing the draft for the Vietnam War. The curse of apartheid in South Africa found some resonance with the
treatment of Aborigines on Queensland reserves at the time. There was much cause for community engagement. We students had a real sense of community as we rallied for justice.

Today, university life is very different. Back in 1971, we did not pay fees. Many of us were on Commonwealth scholarships. We were full time students and we did not need to have part time jobs. There was a strong, government funded student union and well resourced clubs and facilities. There was no internet, so we had to come to lectures. And there were plenty of tutorials. How do we create community within our university today? Even our full time students live like part time students, holding down part time jobs. Everyone is fee paying. There is no compulsory levy for student union and club activities. More courses are offered as intensive units. Others are done on-line with the internet. The sense of community is less tangible. Students now look to mega events like the “Big Event” which has just concluded with students from all the ACU campuses nationwide. We need first to constitute community within the university if we are to be engaged in the broader community.

Seeking to be engaged on mission in the community, we go forth in our role as scholars. The Palestinian exile Edward Said who became a leading public intellectual in the US reminds us that the intellectual is bound to be an outsider if he is true to himself and his mission:

The pattern that sets the course for the intellectual as outsider is best exemplified by the condition of exile, the state of never being fully adjusted, always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives….Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others. You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one in your new home or situation.

Strangers though we be, we need to connect with the community at large. A few months ago, I received a phone call from a journalist writing one of those weekend glossy profiles on the colourful Senator Bill Heffernan. The journalist wanted my opinion on the good senator. Why me? I asked him to call back in a couple of hours. I then checked with Heffernan’s office to be told that the senator had recommended that the journalist contact me. I know these colour pieces need some contrast with the occasional negative comment about the subject. But why me? Bill thought I would be a good one to speak my mind. The journalist asked if I actually did spend time with the senator. ‘Indeed I do’, I told him. People like me do not get much access to the Howard government. The ministers and their staff are like the Bjelke Petersen government in their latter years. Well entrenched, they do not need to speak to the rest of us who might see the world differently.

I recalled my first visit to Canberra in 2002 after I had made my initial foray to the Woomera Detention Centre. In my wanderings around the corridors of Parliament House I met with Heffernan who explained the government strategy starkly and simply. Having been a local councillor and being a lifetime farmer, he described to me the moral dilemma that confronts you during a major bushfire. You have to build a firebreak. You have to choose someone’s property as the firebreak. In destroying their property, you will save the neighbourhood. ‘It’s not pretty. These are hard moral decisions. But you have to do it.’ The government’s boast a year later was that the firebreak seemed to have worked, at least for the moment. The boats had stopped
coming. The borders were secure and Australia could choose those refugees to whom it wished to offer places under its generous offshore refugee selection program. I told the journalist that the good thing about speaking to Heffernan over a cup of tea was that you could get the government message straight, and you could assess the room for movement and compromise. I described Heffernan as “Howard without the spin.” The journalist obviously liked that line as it ended up as a caption under the photo of the senator sprawling on his couch at home on the farm.

Much of the dynamic of engagement and mission is summed up in this photo:

![Photo of minister and interlocutor](image)

Everyone recognises the minister in a characteristic governmental pose. Her interlocutor is Nasrin, a young Iranian mother who was held in detention at Woomera for years with her young son. During the Easter riots in 2002, her son was hit with a baton and sprayed with tear gas. She single-handedly fought a case in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission culminating in the Immigration Department writing an apology for the assault on her son.

In the official apology, dated 23 December 2003, the government acknowledged “that at the end of an exhaustive investigation, where the (HREOC) delegate duly and fairly considered submissions from all concerned parties, (the delegate) has found, on the balance of probabilities, that your son was struck with a baton by an unknown Australasian Correctional Management (ACM) officer and that this constituted a
breach of his human rights.” Having apologised, the government noted “that this apology is made on a without prejudice basis and with no admission as to liability”.

The mother decided not to seek compensation for the assault. She responded to the government, appreciating receipt of the apology, and noting:

While in detention, I was not able to have any police force adequately investigate the circumstances that resulted in my seven year old son being hit with a baton and tear gas. As you know, I reported my son’s injury to the ACM doctor at the earliest opportunity. While in detention, I was interviewed by police on two occasions and was told by the South Australian police, ‘You can’t do anything because you are captive in here and when you get out and get your visa, you can continue your protest and maybe you can get your rights.’ When I lodged my complaint with HREOC, I said, ‘I trusted the government to protect my son. I hope my complaint can help other mothers and children.’

It has been a very difficult experience for me having to represent my son and myself before HREOC while you and ACM had many lawyers to appear for you. Yet again, now that my complaint has been upheld, I express my hope that this process can help other mothers and children who are held in detention under the care and control of your contractor which even now cannot admit its mistakes.

She concluded her letter: “Thank you for your apology. My son and I accept it in the spirit in which it is offered.” She and her son now have permanent residence in Australia. She works as a nurse in a large city hospital and her son is completing primary school. The third woman in the photo is a community advocate, Marilyn Shepherd, who has been tireless in agitating the rights of asylum seekers in Woomera and then in Baxter. Except for her and the many young university graduates and students who regularly attended the remote detention centres, the Australian community would have been much less informed, and the detainees would have had less community contact to fuel and sustain their hope. Without the community advocates, it is very unlikely that the minister and Nasrin would ever have come face to face as they did after this church service in Adelaide.

If we are to be true to ourselves as faculty and students in the academy, we need to accept that there is likely to be some difference and tension between us and university administrators and marketers. Fr Edward Dooley SJ, the new chaplain to the North Sydney campus, and myself have each returned from a stint at Boston College, a large and successful Jesuit university. Several Jesuit academics from that university have just published a collection of essays entitled Jesuit Postmodern investigating scholarship, vocation, and identity in the 21st century. The editor of the collection, Francis X Clooney SJ has just transferred from BC to the Harvard Divinity School where he is Parkman Professor of Divinity. Reflecting on his time across the Charles River at BC he says:

Unlike the missionary scholar, I have never succeeded in dramatising the Catholic and Jesuit ways as intellectually preferable, and consequently could not play a useful role in Boston College’s self-presentation. As a scholar with a reserve of difficult questions, I could not be relied upon to shore up the settled view of what a Jesuit university – as institution, as ministry – is supposed to be. Institution and scholarly practice, administrators and professors, now seem at odds, on friendly terms but vaguely disappointing to one another.

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1 Letter of Garry Fleming, Assistant Secretary, Detention Policy Branch, DIMIA, to Ms KJ, 23 December 2003
2 Letter of Ms KJ to Bill Farmer, Secretary, DIMIA, 16 January 2004
Not everyone in the academy will be pulling one way or singing from the same hymn sheet as we seek to position ourselves as an engaged university. On our mission to the world, we will not be able to present absolute certainties. In our post-modern era, we recall Karl Popper’s warning even about the discipline of science:

The empirical basis of objective science has thus nothing ‘absolute’ about it. Science does not rest upon rock-bottom. The bold structure of its theories rises, as it were, above a swamp. It is like a building erected on piles. The piles are driven down from above into the swamp, but not down to any natural or given base; and when we cease our attempts to drive our piles into a deeper layer, it is not because we have reached firm ground. We simply stop when we are satisfied that they are firm enough to carry the structure, at least for the time being.

As we seek to engage in our world, there is no point in our pretending to greater certainty about our presuppositions than we have. In the end, we may need humbly to acknowledge that we take much on trust, hoping that the piles we have erected will hold our life project for the time being.

My final challenge to those of us seeking to position ACU as an engaged university is to acknowledge difference in the community we seek to serve and change.

Last year I completed work in Rome on a Jesuit Taskforce on globalisation and marginalisation. It was the sort of process that only the Jesuits could come up with – exasperating and ultimately producing a long document sitting now on many shelves around the world. We were a diverse group to say the least, all Jesuit but different in most other ways: a philosopher from the Congo, an economist from Milan, a theologian from Leuven, a sociologist from Mumbai, a university rector from Venezuela, a networker with the World Bank and IMF from Washington DC, and a lawyer from Australia. We did try to come up with some practical and grounded suggestions. Let me offer them to you with some adaptation for the administration, faculty and students of a Catholic university engaged on mission in the world.

To adapt our charism to the mission demands of a globalised and marginalised world, we should all be encouraged to examine the following, sample check-list of activities and dispositions which indicate our real willingness to move into this new world:

1. Espouse and cherish differences amongst ourselves as a privileged means of addressing the divisions in our marginalised and globalising world.

2. Presume that God’s self-revelation will be disclosed amidst differences and not just in the resolving of difference.

3. Adopt one justice issue, inform yourself, and after close contact with the marginalised, take some political action (no matter where you live nor what your work nor what your role in the university).

4. Ask yourself, when you consume resources, if similar consumption by all is sustainable. If it is not, ask yourself what you will do to make up or put right your excessive consumption of limited global resources.

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I am indebted to Ron Anderson SJ for the quotes from Said, Popper and Malebranche. They are found in his essay “Studying Physics and Jesuit Life: Worldliness and Life as an Immigrant”, in F. X. Clooney (ed.), Jesuit Postmodern, Lexington Books, 2006 at pp. 130, 129 and 155 respectively.
5 Be an advocate for at least one culture different from your own.

6 Acquire an appreciative and advanced knowledge of at least one religion not your own.

Together we might then walk the tightrope of being sufficiently at home to be engaged, and enough the stranger to be on mission.