Formal Meal

Remarks by President Tim Vine
Delivered Sept. 23, 2026

Good evening, everyone.

What a pleasure it is to be here for my first formal meal at King's. I know it's the first for some of you as well.

One of the things I have been learning since arriving here in July is that King's is a place that takes its traditions seriously, even the fun ones. There are a lot of them. Some are very old. Some are slightly mysterious. Some, I am discovering, are old enough that no one seems entirely certain why we do them anymore, which may be the surest sign that they are genuine traditions.

It's had me thinking about traditions and what they are actually for.

An institution that has been around since 1789 inevitably accumulates them. We inherit buildings, ceremonies, stories, songs, ways of speaking, ways of gathering—and, of course, special meals like this one.

There's much that's appealing about that, the continuity and repetition of traditions. Especially as the world around us changes increasingly quickly. Universities themselves are changing. Technology is changing the way we work and learn. The labour market is changing. Politics is changing. The way people communicate with one another is certainly changing.

It is a comfort to gather around tables to eat together, as people have done, in one form or another, for millennia—especially now, in this digital age, when we too often substitute screen time for suppers with friends. What a pleasure it is to eat, talk, and enjoy each other's company.

Something important happens every time we invite someone new into a tradition. It's an opportunity to revisit not just what we do, but how and why we do it. After all, tradition is not valuable simply because it is old.

And being an old institution does not mean that everything we have inherited is something to be celebrated.

King's has inherited so many wonderful things: an unusual seriousness about education, a belief in meaningful conversation, a willingness to read complex books and ask difficult questions, a sense that university should be about more than simply acquiring a credential.

We have also inherited complicated histories with which we need to reckon honestly.

Earlier today, Catherine Martin graciously welcomed us onto what is the unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq, in a province shaped in profound ways by African Nova Scotian communities, and at a university that has benefited economically from a history connected to slavery and colonialism.

Those things are also part of our inheritance.

One of the dangers of an old institution is that we can confuse age with virtue. We can romanticize the past rather than actually take the time to understand it.

I don't think our responsibility is to either romanticize our inheritance or to reject it.

Our responsibility is to understand it, to take accountability for it, and then to decide what is worth carrying forward.

And that brings me back to this table, in this room with all of you.

A shared meal is an excellent place to consider the traditions and values of our community, and decide how they play out:

Who is invited to the table?

Who feels comfortable once they are here?

Who gets to speak?

Who must listen?

Whose stories are recounted and whose are left out?

And perhaps most importantly: when somebody shows up who has not traditionally been part of the conversation, what happens? Do we expect them simply to adapt themselves to the table as they found it, or are we willing to create a space for them. Are we willing to let the conversation evolve now that they are part of it?

Those questions apply to universities as much as they apply to dinner parties.

I said in a recent conversation about King's that I believe traditions can be open to anybody.

I believe that quite strongly.

You can have gowns and formal meals and old buildings and Latin and institutional customs that may seem strange to a newcomer--and still say, with complete seriousness: this belongs to you, too.

As long as that invitation is genuine.

After all, traditions exist to be shared. And if a tradition exists primarily to tell some people that they belong and others that they do not, is it a tradition worth preserving?

Compare that with a tradition that allows space for people who are very different from one another to participate in something together and even add something of themselves to it—that can be enormously powerful.

That is how traditions thrive.

They change because the people practicing them change.

King's today is not the King's of 1789. Thank goodness!

Nor should it be.

And the King's of twenty or fifty years from now will not be exactly the King's we know today.

And that's exciting—because it's all of you sitting here tonight who will help shape what the university becomes, and what gets carried forward.

Some of those conversations may even begin tonight, with a new friendship or connection.

Those meaningful conversations exist at the heart of all versions of this place.

I have a fairly particular view of conversation. I don't mean simply talking.

Conversation, at its best, involves a willingness to be changed by what another says.

That is much harder than it sounds.

Most of us are quite good at conversations in which we are waiting for the other person to stop speaking so that we can start again. But that is more dueling monologues than a conversation.

Genuine conversation asks something more of us.

It asks us to bring our own experiences and convictions to the table, certainly. But it also requires enough humility to recognize that another person may see something we do not.

That's the air of conversation that provides oxygen for transformation, change and growth.

It's also the type of conversation that nourishes a great education and is deeply connected to what happens academically at King's.

You read something carefully.

...wrestle with it.

...talk about it with other people.

Someone offers an interpretation you had not considered.

You argue with it.

Perhaps you reject it.

Maybe it changes your mind.

Perhaps you leave the room even more convinced of what you thought before, but now you understand why.

This happens in classrooms, but it also happens in gatherings like this.

It's about so much more than transferring information from one brain to another.

That may be part of it, but information is not particularly difficult to obtain anymore. Most of us carry more information in our pockets than the greatest libraries in human history could have even dreamt of holding.

It's what we do with that information, to learn how to live with other people.

How to listen.

How to make a judgment when the evidence is incomplete.

How to disagree without treating disagreement as a moral failure.

How to recognize when we are wrong.

How to speak up when something important needs to be said.

And how to become the kind of person capable of exercising those judgments well.

That is the real work of education.

And you cannot learn this alone.

You need friends and teachers; people who know things you don't, those whose lives have been very different from yours, and, occasionally, those who drive you around the bend.

You need people willing to challenge you—and people willing to forgive you when you inevitably get something wrong.

That is what community makes possible.

And this community is not something the university administration can manufacture for you.

We can create conditions for it. We can provide buildings and common spaces and classrooms and, occasionally, lovely dinners such as this one. But the community itself is made by the people sitting in this room. That means there is a responsibility that comes with belonging here.

You must participate.

You need to notice who is sitting alone.

You have to introduce yourself to somebody you don't know.

You must be willing to have conversations with people who are not similar versions of yourself.

You have to make room for somebody who isn't yet sure that this place belongs to them. Those of us who already feel quite comfortable at King's have a particular obligation to do that. Because institutions can be difficult places to access.

We have an extraordinary culture here but need to be conscious that from the outside—and sometimes from the inside—it can have a slightly elitist quality. For some, the architecture, old language, old traditions, old books might feel like home. Others may feel they've walked into somebody else's private club.

It grows to feel like home through thousands of seemingly ordinary encounters:

It happens when somebody remembers your name.

When a professor takes your question seriously.

And a student invites you to sit down.

When somebody bothers to explain a tradition instead of assuming you should already know it. Then, asks you what you think of it.

When we become curious about one another rather than merely polite to one another.

That is the kind of King's we need to continue building. And I say "continue" deliberately. There is already important work underway here to make this community more welcoming and more representative of the world around us.

Being so new here, I am mindful that my job is not to announce that work as though no one had thought of it before. Rather my job is to listen, to learn what has already been done, to help ensure that we do not lose ground, and, where I can, to help move that work further.

Relationships are not repaired by saying the right thing at a microphone. They will be strengthened through those deeper conversations, sustained relationships, through listening, through action, and through being willing to be held accountable for what we say we are going to do.

That work will take time. Most worthwhile things in life do. But I think there is a connection between that larger work and what we are doing tonight. Both begin with the willingness to sit at a table together. Not because we all agree. Or come from the same place. And not because we have somehow settled all of the complicated questions raised by our history.

We sit together because we have committed to building a community in which those conversations are possible.

Perhaps that is one of the best things an old university can still offer: a place where we take ideas, and one another, seriously; where we have preserved enough memory to know that we inherited

something before we arrived, and with enough imagination to envision what we want to build and leave behind.

For those of you who are new to King's, as I am, I hope you will not regard traditions like this one as something you are merely visiting.

They are yours now too. Learn them. Question them. Enjoy them. Change them where they need changing. And pass the best of them along.

For those who have been here for some time, I hope we remember that the vitality of a tradition depends upon our willingness to share it.

Thank you for inviting me to be a part of it. Thanks to all those who make tonight's formal meal one to remember—including the whole team at Chartwells, and Katie Merwin, our Dean of Students.

Thank you also to those who organized Matriculation, and who guided we who are new to King's through another of its longstanding traditions—Susan and Elsie, Keenan, Jenn, Julia in the Registrar's Office. And Peter O'Brien, our Public Orator, of course.

So tonight, enjoy the meal. Talk to someone you don't know and immerse yourself in a story you haven't heard before.

Because beyond the buildings, the books, and the 237 years of history, you'll find the best of King's right here, at these tables, in these conversations, with these people. It's here that you'll decide what to change, what to carry forward and what to create—traditions old and new. They're yours now, too.

I am very glad to be a part of this process and to share my first formal meal at King's with all of you.

Thank you.