I went to buy a new gown last week. After chatting for a bit about university life and the complexities of academic dress, the assistant asked me what position I was taking up. My response took a moment to sink in, before he chuckled and said, ‘well, masters really are changing’.

Thank you to the Governing Body for electing me, and the fellowship for placing your trust in me. I am honoured to stand here today as your 15th Master, and the first woman to hold this office.

That feels well timed. This year we celebrate fifty years since St Edmund’s took female students, the first to welcome men and women.

This all says something much wider and deeper about St Edmund’s.

When I was an undergraduate, St Edmund’s was sequestered behind our glorious trees on Mount Pleasant, a place largely discovered only if you were coming anyway. Some of you here or watching in the Garden Room and across the world, can remember when St Edmund’s was home to under 100 students.

Physically we have changed tremendously.

Thanks to the vision, hard work and commitment of so many here today, and some who aren’t, including Matthew Bullock, my predecessor, with the opening last month of Mount Pleasant Halls, St Edmund’s has burst out into the open.

An unabashed presence in Cambridge, today we are a thriving community of nearly a thousand fellows, senior members, students and staff.

And, with the growth and change of Cambridge – so pronounced that when I visited the college last summer, I thought I’d got off at the wrong stop – we are now closer to much of the city’s academic and enterprise life than is the historic centre.

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But there are other things which have evolved, but not changed.

I haven’t yet had the chance to meet most of you, and very much look forward to changing that. But from listening and learning about our community thus far, three words feel as relevant a hundred years ago as they do today: open, outward looking, and optimistic.

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Unimaginable as it might seem today, until the 1870s the Test Acts, among other limitations they had imposed, stopped non-Anglicans from holding any office in Cambridge.
From our founding in 1896, by the Duke of Norfolk in collaboration with Baron von Hügel and Edmond Nolan. St Edmund’s was built on the belief that the highest quality scholarship and education should be open to people from all backgrounds.

Today, as a mature college, that also means a diverse wealth of life experience that further enriches our community.

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Our founders were part of a global body. Arguably, it was the globalism of the Catholic Church, which so concerned the political Establishment of this country that it brought in the Test Acts in the 17th century. It’s therefore unsurprising that St Edmund’s has always been outward looking.

We have alumni from nearly 140 countries, and this year welcome students from Albania to Zimbabwe and 66 countries in between. We have educated theologians and thespians, economists and ecologists, pilots and politicians.

From our inception it was clear that this is a place of outward looking, rigorous intellectual enquiry. Think of the Big Bang, first proposed by Lemaître, a Belgian priest and member of this college.

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I’ve been told that we have one alumnus from Mongolia – so Gantulga if you are listening forgive my accent! But there is a saying in Mongolian:

АЙвал бүү ХИЙ
ХИЙвэл бүү АЙ

Which roughly means, ‘don’t start something if you are afraid, and if you’ve started something don’t be afraid’.

Which brings me to Optimism.

I suggest it’s taken not only an astute community, to pilot a College on a path like that of St Edmund’s, but also one with a knack for spotting and responding to opportunities. Especially during our last 50 years of growth.

Our student body numbered 40 in 1970, 90 in 1980, 250 in 2000 and 491 in 2010. We stand today as a community of just under 600 students.

Now, I’m certainly not suggesting we continue to double each decade. If we did by 2030 we’d be larger than my former college, Trinity, and by 2050 nudging toward 50% of the current University!

But how exciting it is to have become a part of a community that has such dynamism and vision at its core. Perhaps this is a College able to hold its nerve, because while questions might stir occasionally about how we describe ourselves, to someone new, this community feels as if it has always known who it is.

Maybe the challenge, now we have grown into an unavoidable presence in Cambridge, is how best to describe something that is, not how to choose which thing to become.

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What then is the most important part of this College?
Well, what is striking about St Edmund’s, whether in the three words I’ve chosen today, our openness, outwardness and optimism, or others you might prefer, is our focus on people.

We’ve grown and expanded to provide more people with more opportunities.

We build – when we can find the money, a perennial challenge for a college whose alumni were, until our comparatively recent growth spurt, few and overwhelmingly Catholic priests – we build, because our people need somewhere to live, or somewhere to meet or eat or learn.

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Two quotes from people here today who first came to St Edmund’s 50 years apart perhaps sum up what makes us, us.

‘We each feel as if we are an intimate part of the story’

and

‘I don’t know what it is, or how it comes about, but warmth oozes out of the walls’.

I felt that warmth on my very first day when I was welcomed with a bowl of fruit, a smile and a toddler determined to carry something upstairs for me. This family had no idea I was to be the next Master – at least, given how I looked after a long and laden journey, I rather hope they didn’t! They just saw another person who needed a friendly hand.

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So where to end this beginning?

Where better than with our namesake. Not that much detail has survived on the life of St Edmund of Abingdon, but I suspect he might have had a pretty shrewd idea how we each feel at the start of this new year and new chapter.

He was no stranger to moving to new institutions and new countries. He was a student, a scholar, a mediator and the treasurer of Salisbury cathedral, while it was being built.

He will have known the daily, often unsung, effort of staff working tirelessly to run a complicated institution on a tight budget. The sometime loneliness of academic study and research. The moments of self-doubt.

But he will also have known success and the vitality of a nurturing and inspiring intellectual community, a community committed to academic excellence, in which research, learning and teaching flourish.

St Edmund concluded his only surviving work with an injunction: within a community to live - ‘honourably, amicably and with humility’.

That seems like pretty sound advice - even 800 years later.

I look forward to working with you and for our College, here, and in Cambridge, and across the world.

And let’s help each other to, among other things, stay open, outward looking and optimistic.

And to keep that warmth oozing.