

*“So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth:  
it shall not return unto me empty”*

Prayer, the poet George Herbert reminds us, is *“something understood.”* He offers a rich and wonderfully varied kaleidoscope of images that range from the biblical to the pastoral, from the natural to the theological, from the quaintly domestic to the wildly exotic. They are all images of prayer, images of the yearning of the soul for things beyond its reach and yet within its grasp, present and yet transcendent.

*Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,  
God’s breath in man returning to his birth,  
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage ...*

It is, he says, *“a kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear...”*

*Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the souls bloud,  
The land of spices...*

But finally, as if running in and through it all, prayer is simply *“something understood.”*

What can he possibly mean by something understood? Is it simply what is grasped and comprehended by the mind? Or is it what *stands under* all that the mind seeks to grasp and realize? In other words, what the mind in its endeavour and activity has sought to understand because there is something to understand. Something understood.

We meet this morning to give thanks to God for the many and varied labours, intellectual, spiritual, athletic and aesthetic which culminate in your graduation. Today you step up to receive prizes and awards but even more, you step up to step out of high school. Hooray! *“O frabjous day, Callooh, Callay!”* Today you become graduates and alumni of this School. It is an exciting and special day for you, for your parents and grandparents, for your friends and family. It is, I have to say, a deeply emotional day for all of us who have been your teachers and mentors, coaches and advisors over the years. We, too, are proud of you and we, too, are both glad and sad to see you go. We have, after all, been through so much together. We have laughed and cried, sung and danced, cajoled and challenged one another. It has all been great fun, even if, as Heechul often recalls, *“learning is suffering.”* So much suffering!

Encaenia is a Greek word (εν & καινοσ) – no, not a Headmaster’s word, not enough syllables and not Latinate – but, like the Headmaster, under whose leadership you have been privileged to be students and, indeed, to be the last class to graduate, the word speaks to new beginnings by way of honouring the principles that last. The word signals the theme of dedication and renewal through things which have been understood and which stand under, as it were,

human intellectual endeavour, and that belong to the purpose and identity of the School. The term itself derives from "*the annual commemoration of founders and benefactors at Oxford University in June,*" and has not suffered all that much of a sea-change in its being extended to various schools and colleges throughout the world, such as our own.

This day is not just an ending but a beginning, a beginning to what is a continuing in the same dance of the understanding that has defined your educational experience here at King's-Edgehill School. You go forth from the School, to be sure, but as having been part of something which, in one way or another, remains part of you.

In a way, it is captured in what we have done morning after morning, bleary-eyed, and, at times, weary and recalcitrant, here in the Chapel at the start of each day. And you thought I was snoring! I, on the other hand, am sure that some of you were! What we have done has been to pray, to seek the understanding of what is to be understood and which carries over into every activity of the day. Altogether it is part and parcel of prayer, of the seeking to understand and to enter into the understanding of what is there to be understood. You have been shaped by the ideals of an education that concern nothing less than the whole person with respect to the formative qualities of "*gentleness, humanity and learning.*"

In our contemporary world, that alone is a rare and special privilege. It has been yours. Build upon it and live from it, is really all that I can say. Honour what you have been given and give from what you have received.

It is all part of the dance of the understanding. In the lesson which Hannah read from *Isaiah*, there is this wonderful sense of going forth with joy and with purpose. Why? Because there is a joy and a purpose to be grasped and pursued. "*Something understood.*" In the lesson which Mobolaji read from *Revelation*, something of that purpose and joy is captured in the profoundest of images, the image of heaven seen as a city that unites the rural and the urban, nature and humanity, God and man, in a community of spiritual purpose. It is a wonderful image of reconciliation and unity, a reconciliation that is about that deeper work of the understanding when human reason stands upon what stands under the very possibility of its activity, namely, the divine understanding that seeks the good and perfection in truth of all things.

You go forth into a deeply troubled and conflicted world where the dance of the understanding, in the face of the woes and the worries of the world, is badly needed. "*Human nature lies upon the operating table,*" as the scientist, scholar and bio-ethicist, Leon Kass, puts it. "*The evening spread out against the sky/like a patient etherized upon a table,*" as T. S. Eliot memorably imagined. 'Now is the end of the world,' some environmentalists gloomily predict, our power over nature somehow rendering us now utterly powerless. The glib confidence in various

schemes of social engineering now seems less naïve and more disturbing, if not altogether destructive and deadly. Peace and stability in the global world seem quite elusive, if not utterly remote. And, of course, it is all the fault of religion, if Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins are to be believed, forgetting what George Steiner in his Massey Lectures years ago observed, that where God has been banished from the mind, a plethora of false gods rush in, a parody of the true, pointing out the parody of religion in the now discredited ideologies of Marxist politics, Freudian psychology and Lévi-Strauss's social anthropology. The West is dead, some are quick to claim. "What is the West?" others, like Philip Nemo, more wisely ask.

There are no easy solutions, it seems to me, especially practical ones, and indeed, there is nothing more destructive than our arrogant folly about the practical, nothing more deadly than our retreat into cynicism and despair, and nothing more despairing than our immersion into the narcissisms of self-indulgence. As Kass observes, such is really the culture of "Ritalin for the young, Viagra for the old and Prozac for everyone," noting that this is not unlike the dystopia of Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World," where the one thing that we have willingly forsaken is the commitment to moral truth and critical thought in favour of a mindless and mechanical sensuality. His futuristic vision has become all too much our present reality.

Such things belong to a despair about ethical reasoning. The counter to that despair is what you have been a part of here at the School where the seeds of a larger understanding, we hope and pray, have been planted, a larger understanding that is about the primacy of ethical reasoning in and through the intellectual disciplines of study. We live within a moral universe. Forget that and one has learned nothing.

What there is for you, I pray, is the quiet determination to press on in the dance of the understanding, seeking the reconciliation that belongs to the truth and dignity of our humanity, and not despairing. I would like to conclude with Dante, the great poet of medieval culture, who captures that image of the dance of the understanding most wonderfully in his *Paradiso*.

There the Heaven of the Sun, symbolic of intellectual life and enlightenment, is described as a double circle of scholars, *la doppia danza*, united in and through the great variety of their intellectual perspectives, where each praises the other, even their intellectual and spiritual rivals, in an extended vision of reconciling truth and understanding. The vision embraces the diversities of religion as Thomas Aquinas praises a Latin Averroist, Sigier of Brabant, whose theology was profoundly influenced by the Arabic teachings of the Islamic philosopher, Averroës. "That's the eternal light of Sigier," Thomas says of his rival, "who, / Lecturing down in Straw Street, hammered home / Invidious truths, as logic taught him to." Invidious truths. Intellectual integrity and ethical commitment are to be

prized and honoured beyond the illusions of popularity in every age and in every culture.

The dance goes on. I pray that you will take your part in it, alive to the things of the understanding, to prayer as *“something understood.”* May God bless you as you go forth in peace and joy and with a sense of purpose and accomplishment. It is, I hope, *aufwiedersehen*. *Adios, amigos*. We bid you *adieu*. Literally, go with God.

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*(Rev'd) David Curry  
Chaplain, King's-Edgehill School  
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