

“One thing is needful”

“The time has come,” the walrus said, “to talk of many things,” and yet we have just heard that one thing is needful, unum necessarium.

This is, it seems, a day of many things, the many things of many years all rolling down, however, to just one thing, your graduation. Here you are on *the last day* of your careers as high school students, *the last day* at King’s-Edgehill as students, *the last day* in Chapel, too, alas, *the last day* before you step up and step out as graduates and alumni, for that is exactly what graduation is all about, a stepping up to new challenges and new beginnings. To graduate is to take another step, *gradus*, in your education. Today, you are the pride of the school, your parents and grandparents, your friends and family. We salute you for all that you have accomplished. We *“crown and miter you over yourself,”* as Dante puts it.

We have been through a lot together, especially in this your graduating year, and whether you have been here for one year or more, much has happened that has become, indelibly and indubitably (I had to get that in, a nod to Descartes!), without doubt, a part of you. We have had to learn to grieve together, with Jared and his family and with one another. We have had to learn to laugh and sing, to pray and think, to march and run, to sit and listen. And yet all the many things come down to the moment of your graduation. A milestone in your lives has been reached and you now step out into the world as graduates, *“impatient,”* perhaps, as T.S. Eliot puts it in the Preludes, *“to assume the world,”* but not, I hope, with *“eyes assured of certain certainties.”* No, but aware, instead, of how today is really a necessary *prelude* to other things that will constantly require a kind of thoughtfulness of mind in the serious quest to know and understand, something which, I hope, has become an essential feature of your education here.

For that is what a real education is all about. It is not about a piece of paper, *“mere credentialing,”* as the late Jane Jacobs called contemporary education, but a taking hold of what has been opened out to you and making it your own. The many things of the many years, the many hours of cadets, sports, classes, chapel, concerts, choir, debates, exams, TOK, IB therefore I am or not to be, are all concentrated in one thing, one thing needful. It is this: the realization of yourselves as learners.

It is captured in the readings. You *“go out with joy,”* in the lesson which Erin read, because the Word of God has not gone forth in vain but with purpose, a purpose that you can take a hold of in your lives in the understanding and appreciation of that larger world of which you are a part. You have seen something of that in the formative life of the School. For what is education if it is not formative, if it does not draw you out of the raw rudeness of yourself and into the beginnings of erudition, literally, out of rudeness? Yes, even manners matter, as you know! They are, at the very least, about self-control and respect and dignity based upon an awareness of place and situation where thoughts and actions do count; a way, surely, of thinking beyond ourselves.

The lesson which Sandy read captures that attitude of mind so necessary to education in the figure of Mary, *“sitting and listening to Jesus”*. Oh, I know, we all want

to be doers, makers and shakers, but doing what? Making and shaking what? And to what end? Luke's story here is even more powerful when we realize that it comes hard on the heels of the story of the Good Samaritan which bids us "go and do likewise", commanding us to be committed to the good of others, for the stranger and the wanderer in our midst is also our neighbour. But the point is that we cannot "go and do likewise", like Christ the Good Samaritan, without knowing the limits of the human condition and need for divine grace. When we forget that, we become monsters.

As the great German poet Friedrich Hölderlin puts it, "*what has always made the state a hell on earth has been precisely that man has tried to make it his heaven*", and this was some time before the various hells on earth of the twentieth century were visited upon us whose shadows yet hang over us. Sitting and listening are not activities that excuse us from responsible action; they are the precondition for it. And herein lies the real importance of education and, may I say, an education which at least attempts to acknowledge the necessary place of religion. For without the moral and the ethical, the philosophical and the contemplative, learning only serves the mere techniques of destruction.

Heaven and Hell. No doubt there are times when it has seemed more like one than the other! But really your time here has been, I think, a necessary and healthy kind of purgatory for that, in a way, is what real education is about, a purging of all within us that stands in the way of what we need to acquire. Nowhere is the idea of education as purgatory more wonderfully illustrated than in Dante's *Purgatorio*. His poetic summa, the *Divine Comedy*, captures more than the spirit and mind of the medieval world of western Europe; it speaks beyond to the principles and ideals of a moral and intellectual education for all times.

The *Purgatorio* is the only part of the *Commedia* that presents the journey of the soul as a *temporal* progress, literally in a series of steps, grades, if you will, where the vices of the soul, the proverbial seven deadly sins, are expunged while the corrective and formative virtues of the soul are acquired. The lessons are like the lessons of school, requiring that we sit and listen, look and think as well as act and do. *Guarda e ascolta*. Look and listen is fundamental to the graduating programme of the *Purgatorio* that results, finally, in a wonderful moment that challenges and confounds our contemporary confusions about the secular and the sacred. "*I crown and miter you over yourself,*" the poet of ancient Rome, Virgil, says to the student-pilgrim Dante; the crown signaling the secular realm, the miter, a bishop's hat, the sacred. And it happens in a garden. The garden of life is the garden of learning. Dig it! The interchange is an exquisite commentary on real education. Looking and listening both precede and follow this exchange. In other words, the beat goes on and so does education.

But the upward journey of the *Purgatorio* is what is most instructive. "*Now from the grave wake poetry again,*" it begins, in a kind of resurrection of the understanding from the deadening realms of the infernos of our self-will that close us off to love and to God, to ourselves and to one another. But the journey is necessarily undertaken, not in the über-confidence and over-weening arrogance of adolescence, but in humility and

becoming modesty. Dante is girded with *l'umile pianta*, the humble reed, and the journey upward, step by step, is about a series of instructions dealing with two things which we have to contemplate, namely, the disorders of our wills that result in sin and disgrace, on the one hand, and the examples of virtue and grace that ennoble and perfect human character, on the other hand. The point being that they have to be learned, often by sitting and listening, and then, by acting upon what has been seen and heard. It goes without saying that similar sorts of arguments, albeit in accord with what is distinctive about each, could be made from the spiritual riches of Judaism and Islam.

The whole educational programme suggests that concentration of purpose upon the one thing needful. Of course, there may be many challenges and, perhaps, many surprises along the way, like in the following story.

At a meeting of the college faculty, an angel suddenly appears and tells the head of the philosophy department, "I will grant you whichever of three blessings you choose: Wisdom, Beauty - or ten million dollars."

Immediately, the professor chooses Wisdom.

There is a flash of lightning, and the professor appears transformed, but he just sits there, staring down at the table. One of his colleagues whispers, "Say something."

The professor says, "I should have taken the money."

Such is a kind of wisdom, I suppose!

The journey goes on for all of you. Our prayers and hopes are that the lessons learned continue to be learned and that you go forth from this school wiser and more mature than when you came in. You carry all of the memories of our times together with you, times that may have seemed like Hell and were, and other times that were magical and mystical and may have seemed like Heaven and were, but all of it a kind of purgatorial progress, a journey of the mind and soul that speaks to character. We hope that you will be better people for it in spite of all our obvious short-comings and failings, too.

We are at once sad and glad to see you go. You have become so dear to us. There is something painfully poignant and emotional about these occasions. I suppose that it is part of our purgatory to *crown and miter you over yourselves*, proud of what you have made your own from what has been opened out to you. We wish you all the best. Adios amigos, Adieu mes amis, Go with God. Grüß Gott, May God bless you. Aufwiedersehen, until we see you again. Remember Brandon. Go forth with joy as learners having a hold of the one thing needful, a life and a love of learning.

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Rev'd David Curry, Chaplain, Encaenia, June 14th, 2008