

“Take with you words”

“How came we ashore?”, asks Miranda having just heard of the tempests of betrayal and deceit, confusion and disarray that exiled her and her father from Milan. *“By Providence divine”*, replies Prospero, only too well aware at once of the plots and schemes of others as well as his own neglect of what belonged to his office. There is, it seems, *“a divinity that shapes our ends/ rough-hew them how we will”*, if only we will have the eyes to see, the minds to know and the hearts to love that which we see and know. How came we ashore?

For here you are at last, on the last day of High School! At last, the last Chapel! Alas, alack! A day so long awaited, a day for which your parents and grandparents have been waiting, some with baited breath, some with a sense of fearful anticipation, some in much prayer, I know, and all, perhaps, with at least some anxiety. Would you make it? You have and you are all the pride of your families and friends, your teachers and mentors on this day. You are the pride of the school. Was there really any doubt? But of course! Let us not kid ourselves about the tempests within and without. Shipwrecks do abound. *“There go I but for the grace of God”*, we might say.

This day is nothing more and nothing less than the culmination of the things that have belonged to your career and life here at King’s-Edgehill, whether it has been for one year or for half a dozen. You have had to enter into the things which have been expected of you, the demands, seemingly endless at times, seemingly impossible at times, which have been required of you. I salute you in utter amazement for how graciously and how splendidly you have done. I had to get the ‘Rev word’ in, you know, *“splendid”*. *“Outstanding”*, now that is the Darcy Walsh word. *“Marvelous”*, now that is a Melody Hopkins word and one which we shall miss along with her marvelous smile, and well, what do we say about the Headmaster’s word? – an *encomium superbium*, perhaps, *“high praise”* to put it modestly – for all that you have accomplished and above all else for the manner in which you have completed your programme of life here at King’s-Edgehill. Well done, we salute you, though I hope that we are not those *“who are about to die”*, at least not immediately, in the arena of life (*morituri te salutamus*).

Today is your graduation day, the day you step out and step up into a whole new world of adult duties and responsibilities. You are literally making the grade, taking the next step up, but entirely upon the foundation of things moral and intellectual, academic and athletic, cultural and social that have belonged to your time here, be it but *einen augenblick* or the *longue durée*. *Vita brevis, ars longa*. Life is short, studies are forever.

Today, you step out but what do you take with you? Merely a piece of rolled paper? Not a joint, I assure you. That would be a *step down* into the cave of

unreason and the sleep of sensuality, into the lotus land of hedonism from which, as in *The Odyssey*, there is no homecoming and only the loss of self. Do you simply step out onto the laborious step-after-step of contemporary life? That would be a *step onto the level*, onto the mere continuum of the hum-drum and the everyday. No. You step out in order to *step up*, I hope, to new challenges and greater responsibilities in the light of reason and grace because of the lessons which have been learned here. For graduation cannot mean the leaving behind of what is part and parcel of your being but rather the carrying it forward into something "*rich and strange*", perhaps, but something which always bears a close relation to everything that belongs to the life of the school.

You step out but you cannot simply step away from what has belonged to your time here. You have to take that with you. So what do you take with you from your time of abiding here at King's-Edgehill? Words? Oh, come on Rev, not more words, I hear you say!

Well, isn't that just what we hear in the lesson which Kate read? "*Take with you words*", Hosea says, words which are somehow, perhaps, connected to the lesson which Alex read, words from St. John about our abiding in the love of God, "*if you abide in me ... my words abide in you.*" Abiding words. Words which somehow stay with you and take their shape within you. Living words are words which live in the Word of God and only so in us.

There are a host of memories, to be sure, of sadnesses and joys, of pains and pleasures, of frustrations and angers, of jokes and sorrows, the whole grab-bag of shared experiences, the good times and the bad. We have been through so much together. Those things as distorted and re-created, as re-imaged and re-packaged go with you and become part of you. But the moments themselves? No. They can never be re-captured and it is folly even to think to try. No.

All of you who graduate this day have your memories and your stories, some of which can be shared and some of which cannot – we do not want to know and neither do your parents. As one of the more judiciously minded parents said to me last night, not every time is the time for "*full disclosure*". Make no mistake, though, nothing can be hidden forever. But even those things which are idiosyncratic and personal, have to be gathered into something more, into the something more that belongs to the educational project of the school, the things which speak to character and to the formation of character.

For there is no knowledge, as Plato would teach us, that is not ethical. The very idea that there is an ethical dimension to all forms of knowledge is one of the great challenges and one which has been constantly before you here, I think. Nothing could be more counter-culture, on the one hand, and nothing could be

more profoundly culture-shaping, on the other hand, though the measure of such things cannot be what is merely quantitative.

The words which you take with you are, I hope, the words of wisdom and understanding as distinct from the strident words of narcissistic self-expression, or the ideological words of the social and political agendas of our day that betray the discourse of the wider culture of humanism, or the despairing nihilistic words of a cynical and exhausted culture that can no longer think the spiritual and intellectual principles that alone bring honour and integrity, honesty and truth to the forums of our political, social and even ecclesiastical life together.

"Take with you words", as Hosea puts it, himself the great love-prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is not about pat answers but about the gathering of all things back to their principles. Collapsing everything into the competing discourses of our day means cacophony. There can be no harmony without the vision of harmony and unity, of the abiding in truth knowingly and intentionally that is signaled so profoundly in these scripture lessons.

Character. The qualities of *"gentleness and learning"*, for instance, the qualities of *"humanitas"*, for instance, are the principles of character which connect us to a wider discourse of reason and thought from which so much of our world and day is in flight. Ours is the culture of scattered minds and broken hearts, I fear, because we refuse to think the forms of connection in our despair of reason and truth. Relativism is the intellectual cop-out that keeps us in the state of arrested adolescence. The challenge here has been about growing up, about growing up into wisdom and understanding, ultimately about growing up into the wonder and the mystery of the truth of God which gives cogency and coherence to all forms of learning.

You gather here today in the Chapel for the last time as students. A little later in the day than our usual time of gathering, so perhaps you are a little less sleepy, but then there was the dance last night! Oh well, the challenges are ever so. You *"could have danced all night"*. What have we been doing here morning after morning, week after week? Well, it, too, has been about a dance, a dance that never ends. We have been engaged in the dance of theology, the dance of reason and love upon the things of God opened to view through the Scriptures, a dance which seeks to unite in understanding all the various enterprises of the educational project of the school.

And what we have tried to do in this dance is to understand something of the meaning of these images and their vital force for us in our lives. It is not about answers so much as it is about a pattern of understanding, a way of thinking respectfully and responsibly. And in a way, it is just like what we see Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

For in the play, there is a *play within the play* that acts, like the liturgy, to convict our consciences and to call us to account. “*You are three men of sin*”, Ariel proclaims to the betrayers of Prospero, even as we confront the spectacles of our own betrayals of ourselves and one another and God. But “*if our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts*” and that is Shakespeare’s point too, and so there are further lessons. For in the play, there is another *play within the play*, a masque, as it were, that instructs Ferdinand and Miranda about the nature of marriage, about the meaning of growing up into mature love and which leads to further instructions about the principles of the early modern state. And in the play there is the restoration of friendship and fellowship in and through the storms of enmity and betrayal. For there is forgiveness. In a way, they are lessons about character, about growing up into maturity.

But perhaps, the last word is really Caliban’s who undergoes a change, a radical change from the rudeness of barbarity into the possibilities of civilized life. Education, too, is surely about our being led out of ourselves into something greater than ourselves, about erudition, which means out of rudeness. *Verbum sat sapienti*. A word is enough for the wise. “*I’ll be wise hereafter*”, Caliban says, “*and seek for grace*”, he says, signaling that “*sea-change into something rich and strange*” that belongs to the true purpose of education. May that be so for all of you.

You have become quite dear to us and we shall miss you. We bid you adieu, go with God, and pray that you will take with you the words which have belonged to your time here.

“Take with you words and return to the Lord”

*The Rev’d David Curry
Chaplain
Encaenia Service
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