

An Address given at Christopher Newport University by the Rev. Dr  
Ralph Waller, Principal of Harris Manchester College, at the  
Commencement Celebrations on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2005

I would like to say how pleased and honoured I am to be with you here at this Commencement Ceremony at Christopher Newport University. It has been a real joy to me to see something of this great University, to meet students, and Professors, Governors and parents, as well as to be on this platform with President Paul Tribble, a man who combines to a rare degree, genuine goodness, real ability, great enthusiasm and an attractive and loveable personality.

I bring greetings from the University of Oxford, and I hope that this occasion is a first step in a long and happy association between my own College and Christopher Newport University. But today is dedicated to those of you who are graduating. Today you will be joining the ranks of the alumni of this University who are making a major contribution to the life of our times.

Noel Coward once said: There are three great things in life: good friends, good books and good plumbing. At Oxford we can only promise our students the first two of these, while here at Christopher Newport, you have enjoyed all three.

There are a few things I have learned in my life, that I would like to share briefly with those who are graduating today. Firstly, the importance of living thankfully. If one is always grumbling and

complaining life shrivels up. If you want to develop and grow as a person, you have to live thankfully. We have so many things for which we should be thankful: homes, friends, food, freedom, and not least the education you have received from Christopher Newport University. It is often said that a University education is about a few friends and a great number of books – for some of you it has been about a great many friends and a few books. But whichever has been the case, let us be thankful.

Secondly, I should like to emphasise the importance of going on learning all your life. In Oxford I regularly pass the house where Sir William Osler lived. In his published lectures to his medical students, at the beginning of the twentieth century, he tells them that getting their degree is only the beginning of their medical education and not the end. He urges them to take up new interests, new opportunities. He commends the aged doctors of France who with their white hair mix with those who are just beginning. 'Go back to the classroom, take on new studies, take every precaution against arrested intellectual development. Go on learning.' And so must we.

Thirdly, go on thinking. In 1914, J A Smith, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford, began his lecture course in the following way. 'Gentlemen, you are now about to embark upon a course of studies which will occupy you for two years. Together they form a noble adventure. But I would like to remind you of an important point.

Some of you, when you go down from University, will go into the Church or the House of Commons, or to the Home Civil Service, or to the Indian or Colonial Services, or into various professions. Some may go into the army, some into industry and commerce; some may become country gentlemen. A few - I hope a very few - will become teachers and professors. Let me make this clear to you. Except for those in the last category, nothing that you will learn in the course of your studies will be the slightest possible use to you in afterlife - save only this - that if you work hard and intelligently you should be able to detect when a man is talking rot'. And that in my view is the main if not the sole purpose of education.

Fourthly, I become more and more convinced that the proper use of language is at the heart of education and civilised society. Professor Galbraith, when receiving an honorary degree at Oxford lamented that doctors no longer say that the patient is dying, but rather say 'the prognosis at this time is without significant areas of encouragement.' Contrast this with a short account from a girl of eight who was invited to write an essay on a bird and a beast.

*'The bird I am going to write about is an owl. The owl cannot see at all by day and at night is as blind as a bat. I do not know much about the owl, so I will go on to the beast which I am going to choose. It is a cow. The cow is a mammal. It has six sides, right, left, and upper and below. At the back it has a tail on which hangs a brush. With this it*

*sends the flies away so they do not fall into the milk. The head is for the purpose of growing horns and so that the mouth can be somewhere. The horns are to butt with and the mouth is to moo with. Under the cow hangs the milk. It is arranged for milking. When people milk, the milk comes and there is never an end to the supply. How the cow does it I have not yet realised. But it makes more and more. The cow has a fine sense of smell; one can smell it far away. This is the reason for fresh air in the country'.*

This is a wonderful example of the use of language from a young person.

Lastly: friendship. Some people think that the academic life is solely about reading and writing and thinking. But it is also about making friends and sparking off ideas and encouraging one another. This friendship should exist between students and students and teachers and students. Elijah was a great teacher and Elisha, his pupil, was also destined for greatness. The sustaining impulse, that lasted down the years and enabled Auguste Sabatier to finish his life of St Francis of Assisi, was a moment when his teacher, the great Renan, put his hand on Sabatier's shoulder on the steps of the Sorbonne in Paris, and said, 'One day you will write the greatest life of St Francis of Assisi'.

This friendship between teacher and student, and student and student, is at the centre of a great University, and a University where this

ceases to exist must fail in its chief end. The secret of education is 'discerning encouragement' and that often comes through friendship. Keep your friendships in repair, and the future belongs to you.

This day belongs to those of you who are graduating and your parents and friend who have supported you. A small part of this degree also belongs to them. We salute you, we are proud of you and proud of those who have supported you.

I am delighted, honoured and pleased to be here with you at Christopher Newport University; I shall remember this day with great pleasure and much gratitude for the kindness shown to me. Thank you.