

## Graduation Service

MH

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In the traditional fairy-story, a fairy godmother grants her protégé three wishes, all of which are, of course, guaranteed to be fulfilled. But while today's rituals may seem to have something of the nature of a fairy-story, we are, in fact, living in the real world, and I, sadly, am no fairy godmother, just a crusty old don. The best I can do is express three hopes, with no guarantee that they will be fulfilled – indeed, whether they are or not is very largely up to you, today's graduands.

My first hope is that you will go on asking questions. Asking question is, after all, what got you to Cambridge in the first place. Long-suffering parents are frequently infuriated by their children asking them questions, but it is the enquiring mind which makes those precocious children seek the answers to their questions in further study. You may by now have found the answer to some of your questions, but you should also have discovered that those answers simply open up further questions. Those of you who have studied classics or philosophy will know that Socrates demonstrated the importance of asking questions a very long time ago. The writers of the Bible, too, posed questions, and often left their readers to provide the answers. The student who arrives here thinking that science is a matter of discovering facts soon discovers that it is more like a voyage of discovery, carrying out experiments and testing hypotheses. And those who come to Cambridge imagining that there are *historical* 'facts', soon learn that history is a matter of interpretation; there's plenty of questions being asked about our colonial history at the moment, and plenty of reinterpretation of what we thought we knew. Tripos examinations sometimes give the impression of being opportunities to spew out what you know; if they convinced you how little you actually know, take courage! You're on the right track.

There is a story, undoubtedly apocryphal, of a former student who returned in his seventies to his College, and happened to notice a pile of that year's examination questions. He started to read them, and exclaimed with astonishment, 'But these are the same questions that *we* were asked, fifty years ago!' 'Oh yes,' replied his guide, 'we ask the same questions – but we've changed the answers.' A University education is meant to teach you the right questions to ask, and how to approach them, not to provide the answers.

It's even more years than that since I myself graduated and began research work at the University of Bristol. In 1954, when I was half-way through my research, the first ever production of the musical 'Salad Days' was staged by the Bristol Old Vic. It was magic! I went, of course, for the musical tells the story of Timothy and Jane, two new graduates, and their first weeks on leaving the University. As they leave, they sing 'We said we wouldn't look back' .... (tune played on piano): 'I'll remind you to remind me, we said "We wouldn't look back"'. But of course they do. And why not? What's wrong with looking back? – provided that we don't get stuck in a time-warp, like Mr Straw, who lived in the same house for 70 years or so without making any change to it; you probably know that the National Trust preserves his house, just as it was in 1932. Looking back *can* be dangerous, of course, if you don't look where you're going, since you may fall over or bump into something. But I hope that you *will* look back to your time at Robinson with gratitude for what you have been given here and what you have enjoyed. Some of you may of course be remembering what you *weren't* able to enjoy because of covid, which disrupted everything; nevertheless, you've made it, and been able to enjoy so much. So I hope you have happy memories, and are thankful for the generosity of benefactors and staff and teachers who have all given you the great opportunity of enjoying being a student at Robinson. Looking back with gratitude for the past enables us to move on.

And that brings me to my third hope, since today *is*, of course, about moving on. In a few minutes, you will march as graduands to the Senate House and emerge as graduates of this University – chrysalises turned into magnificent butterflies. What next? Some of the questions that will confront you may be a bit more practical and urgent than those you tackled in your tripos examinations! They will concern how you spend your time and your qualifications; what do you want to do with your lives?

Leaving the security of Cambridge may well seem daunting in 2022. The four horsemen of the Apocalypse – conquest, war, famine and pestilence – are on a rampage. Sadly, this is nothing new, as I can vouch, since I have survived the Great Depression, the Second World War, crises of various kinds – the Suez crisis, the Cuba crisis, when we were promised that we would be given a 3-minute warning of our destruction by a nuclear missile – the Cold War, and all the time there were constant reports of wars, , famines, insurrections, and unjust tyrannies. It seems that there is always oppression and disaster in one corner of the world or another, but just recently war and pestilence have moved closer to our shores, and modern communications and social media have made us more aware of famine and the ever-increasing danger from climate change. The challenges are immense: something needs to be done!

No doubt you have been told already to go out and change the world; that it needs to be changed there can be no doubt – and you are the people who *can* change it for the better. We hear a great deal these days in the academic world about tolerance, generally assumed to be a good thing. In certain areas, yes – but I hope you will be *intolerant* of injustice wherever you see it – the injustice of poverty, slavery, tyranny, and hunger – and I hope you will fight it. So my third hope is that you will indeed do precisely that, so that in future years Robinson College will be as proud to number you among our alumni as you are to say that you are a member of Robinson.