



## Graduation Day Sermon

By The Rev'd Duncan Dormor, The Dean

This day upon which degrees are conferred is one for celebration and thanksgiving, highly appropriate then - as our reading from the Jewish book of *Proverbs* puts it - that the tables be laid and the wine mixed as indeed is happening as we speak, but also that all this celebration should take place in response to the voice of Wisdom Personified<sup>i</sup>.

In a few moments you will be lead out through the Main Gate and up the street past Trinity and onto the Senate House. Before the Vice Chancellor's deputy our own Master your degree will be conferred upon you with the words: *'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost...'* (or for some *'in the name of God'*). You will be presented to the Master as being *'sound in learning ...and in behaviour'*. For the former the class lists should provide plenty of evidence, for the latter, the evidence is, perhaps fortunately, more difficult to come by...

The admission to degrees, then, is seen in Cambridge, as a spiritual matter. It is a rite of passage and the conditions for entry are not confined to academic achievement. Rather like our readings, the conditions for admission speak of a broader understanding of education concerned with an attitude of mind, a philosophy of life if you will, which focuses on a task even more demanding than your degree -- how you choose to live your life. That, in the words of our reading: You might:

*'lay aside immaturity... and walk in the way of insight' (Proverbs 9 v 6)*

The call of Lady Wisdom is then to the cultivation of a certain mental attitude – that the candidate might conduct themselves with humility; have relationships with friends, neighbours, work colleagues founded on respect and trust; and understand that thought precedes action and that the tongue, by which thought finds expression, is the intermediary between the two and as such should be employed with discernment.

Our thought, speech and actions are of a piece and a test of our inner integrity. That integrity is shaped by the discipline and understanding that comes from the 'obstinate questionings'<sup>ii</sup> that academic study entails – from astrophysics to architecture; from the careful analysis of texts to the patient conduct of experiments. These exercises are important in their own right, but they also point to the higher goal – that graduands in this university shall have learnt something of personal integrity. For it is integrity, rather than simply ability that is the distinguishing mark of our greatest alumni.

If St John's and Cambridge has effected your being admitted as successful candidates to your degrees, I hope that you will remember alongside perhaps a sense of gratitude, the message of Lady Wisdom: 'That thought precedes speech and speech precedes action. If you have managed to get the reading done; If you've got your experiments to work reasonably well, that in itself is BUT an ingredient in the higher vocation – to lead, in integrity, good and useful lives in the service of Others. For that is actually what is meant by being admitted to your degrees in the name of God in this ancient University

We give thanks for you all on this great day. We are proud of you – and quite rightly so – as you walk down Trinity Street, each woman and man - a Johnian, members of the best college in Cambridge. We wish you well in what is to come – that you may be successful in what you set your hand to, but even more importantly, we hope – even expect - that throughout your lives you seek the path of integrity, will strive to dwell upon *'Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, just, pure, pleasing and commendable.'* (*Phil. 4 v 8*)

---

<sup>i</sup> *Proverbs 9 vv. 1-10*

<sup>ii</sup> A reference to the reading from *'Ode on Intimations of Immortality'* by William Wordsworth (BA 1791)