

An Address for Leavers given by the Revd Dr Michael Piret, Dean of Divinity, on Sunday 14 June 2015, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.

I ought to be ashamed to admit it in this company, so many of you with sophisticated musical tastes, but at home, when brushing my teeth, washing up, cleaning out the cat litter tray, in the background I often put on Classic FM. I know. I'm not proud of it. I do pay the price. There is some truly awful advertising to listen to. At the moment, one of the more nauseating ads is for ... let's call the company, 'Superior Property dot com.' It's meant to encourage unutterably rich people to buy even more expensive houses than the ones they already have. It's beautifully presented. I think it's a famous actor doing the voice-over in a warm, affirming, grandfatherly tone. There's gentle, soothing piano music, as the voice says

To the hard grafters, who built their businesses from scratch.
To the juggling generals, leading offices by day and pacifying kids by night.
To the multi-taskers, who dance their way through stacked work schedules.
Your reward awaits. Find the home you deserve.

I don't think we need to spend time on what makes that bad theology, apart from saying that frenetic efforts to achieve material success do not necessarily equate to virtue or deserve a reward. And even if they did, that an expensive house might not quite be satisfactory as the reward of a life well lived. As a challenge to the philosophy of 'Superior Property dot com,' let me read you a short poem by W.B. Yeats, dating from the last years of his life. There are four verses, this is the whole of it:

His chosen comrades thought at school
He must grow a famous man;
He thought the same and lived by rule,
All his twenties crammed with toil;
'What then?' sang Plato's ghost. 'What then?'

Everything he wrote was read,
After certain years he won
Sufficient money for his need,
Friends that have been friends indeed;
'What then?' sang Plato's ghost. 'What then?'

All his happier dreams came true –
A small old house, wife, daughter, son,
Grounds where plum and cabbage grew,
Poets and Wits about him drew;
'What then?' sang Plato's ghost. 'What then?'

'The work is done,' grown old he thought,
'According to my boyish plan;
Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,
Something to perfection brought';
*But louder sang that ghost, 'What then?'*¹

¹ 'What Then?' from *Last Poems*.. In the *Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), pp. 299-300.

Some of you here are about to leave Oxford – soon, in the next week or so – not to come back except as alumni. It's a time of transition, a time to take stock, to reflect on the things that matter. As we sit in this beautiful Chapel on an Oxford summer evening, soon to hear the pleasant clinking of bottles and the popping of corks in the background, let's be mindful of the question Plato's ghost asks in the Yeats poem.

To some extent, I'm sure, we can all hear something of what that ghost is getting at. We know deep down that it's not enough just to aspire to lives that bring money or fame, what the world calls prestige, the attainment of pleasant physical surroundings, fulfilment in a cosy way of respectable goals. We know there are deeper values. And yet here you are, trained (or having endured attempts at training) in a place likely to make it far easier for you to find comfort, wealth and so-called prestige, than it is for the vast majority of your contemporaries across the social spectrum. You've been in glorious physical surroundings, with the best labs and libraries and tutors, set on paths leading to the fulfilment of those respectable goals. Keep following the tracks industriously, work hard, become one of the 'juggling generals' or whatever, and you have a much-better-than-average chance at material and reputational success. And so accordingly you stand in greater danger of growing deaf to the voice of what Yeats calls Plato's ghost – deaf to the voice that tells us it isn't enough, deaf to any voice calling us to look beyond ourselves and our own ambitions. Deaf to the ghostly presence that reads your devastatingly good CV, or someday reads your entry in *Who's Who*, or your obituary in the *Independent*, and says, 'What then?'

Notice the voice says 'What then?' Not 'So what?' But 'What then?' It isn't that material and reputational success are without potential worth or somehow bad by definition. But the way we use them and what we make of our advantages stands open to judgement, open to critical appraisal from the perspective of a larger vision, which says that the realisation of our own personal goals is not enough. A well lived life cannot just be about material wealth – which, as Jesus says, gets ruined by rust and eaten away by moths (not to mention bad investments or financial crises). Nor can a well lived life be about prestige – which, as the dictionary tells us, has its roots in *praestigium*, it comes to us through the French, *prestige*. That is, an illusion, a conjuring trick, a kind of deception. (This means, incidentally, that all of you must, for the honour of Oxford, do battle with anyone who says you went to a 'prestigious' university. Etymologically speaking, that should be taken as an insult.)

Why should we look beyond our personal goals? Because there is a world of need out there, need that can only be reached by lives which are lived for others. The wise Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton, born a hundred years ago this year, said, 'If you are too obsessed with success, you will forget to live. If you have learned only how to be a success, your life has probably been wasted. If a university concentrates on producing successful people, it is lamentably failing in its obligation to society and to the students themselves.'² Better not to have success, than to be obsessed with it. Better to know your need of God, to be acquainted with the needs of others, not to be indifferent to suffering, to poverty, to injustice. Better to concentrate the energy and time that you have in this world to make a positive difference, using that unique combination of skills and abilities which are yours only - and will never be repeated in anyone else.

² Thomas Merton, 'Learning to Live,' in *Selected Essays*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), p. 440.

My message in this address is simple. This place has brought you great gifts. God willing, it will bring you even greater opportunities and a very substantial capacity to do good. Don't, after many, many years, come to the end of your life only to find it was all just about yourself and your own ambitions. You have this one life to live. Use it to make a difference.

Whether you're a Christian or not, you'll find that the life of Jesus, more than any other, epitomises the life lived for others, and shows that in such a life, humanity is most fully itself. His is the ultimate voice that says 'What then?' His is a voice not just of consolation, but of challenge. And in calling us to reach out to the needs of others, that voice calls us to fullness of life.

And so we pray:

Teach us, good Lord, to serve thee as thou deservest:
to give and not to count the cost;
to fight and not to heed the wounds;
to toil and not to seek for rest;
to labour and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do thy will.
Amen.