

Don't Forget the Ark

Graduation Address to the Class of 2000, Ottawa, April 16, 2000

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Mr. President, Members of Board and Faculty, Graduates, and Guests, I thank the Dean for his generous introduction and for giving me the honour of addressing the graduating class of Augustine College. Let me say that I am very impressed with the whole concept of this College, which sets the first undergraduate year and perhaps eventually an entire degree programme within a Christian framework. I envy the young men and women who have had the privilege of studying here. I congratulate you on your success and wish you God's blessing as you leave this island of faith to continue your higher education in the wide ocean of secular culture.

My words to the graduates on this occasion and at this time must be set in the context of two facts which are obvious. The first is that, having completed an important stage in your career, you are about to enter a new stage with new challenges and opportunities. The second is that you are one of the first graduating classes of the 21st century. This is your century, just as most of the 20th was mine. I survived and even lived through its depressions, wars, revolutions, and rapid social change. You know that there were more changes in the 20th century than in all the centuries since the beginning of the Christian era.

A rich century, but was it rich in the things that really matter? The Faculty may remember Donald Creighton, a distinguished Professor of History and the author of several books. At noon one day some of us were waiting for him to join us at lunch at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto.

Suddenly he burst into the lounge and, without a word of greeting, exclaimed, "On my way here I have been thinking that in terms of the things that matter to us the 19th century was richer than the 20th." Being the people we were, we agreed with him.

What about your century – the 21st? Will it be rich in the things that really matter? I do not know about society as a whole but I know that the value of life resides in the continuity of life and I propose that your future will be rich and rewarding only as you take into it all that is best of your past. To put that proposition in Bible terms – as you enter the Promised Land of the 21st century,

don't forget to follow the ark.

That's not Noah's Ark but the Ark of the Testimony or Covenant that God commanded Moses to make, as described in the Old Testament Book of Exodus. It was a chest of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold, carried on pole handles and decorated with two gold cherubim. God's people carried it everywhere they went during the forty years after their escape from slavery in Egypt. They took it into battle and believed that it was the secret of victory. At last when they came to the River Jordan and looked across at the land that God had promised to give them, Joshua, their new leader, admonished them to follow the ark. His exact words were,

When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God being carried by the Levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place and follow it, that you may know

the way you shall go, for you have not passed this way before.

Joshua 3:3,4

The words “you have not passed this way before” speak to our situation at the beginning of a new century and a new chapter in our lives. For all of us the future is unknown territory, and we are admonished to follow the ark so that we shall know the way we must go.

To God’s ancient people that meant more than taking into the future the best in their cultural and social heritage. That acacia wood box symbolized the very presence of God in their midst. In a sense it was the dwelling-place of God and therefore the source of guidance and power. As Christians we are admonished to follow Jesus Christ, for we believe that in him the presence of God dwelt fully. He is the Ark of the New Covenant, and it is he whom we must follow into the unknown future if we want it to be rich in the things that really matter. Let me hold that proposition before you as a jewel and ask you to examine three of its facets.

G O S P E L

Let me say, to begin with, that if you want your future to be rich in the things that really matter, *don’t forget to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ.*

You know that the word *Gospel* means ‘good news’, which implies that something good has happened, an event we celebrate because it benefits all of us. In the closing months of 1999 newspapers and magazines gave their own opinions and conducted polls of their readers to determine the most important events of the past century and the past two millennia. The answers were as numerous as the people polled. Christians proclaimed the birth of Christ, not only his birth but his life, ministry, death, and resurrection. We believe that he is the Man of all

the Centuries and that his coming is the most important event that not only influenced history but cut history in two. After it happened life on this earth could never be the same again.

That truth is suggested by the story of a conference in outer space that brought together delegates from all the planets to report on the progress made by their civilizations. One announced that they had abolished all poverty and war, another that they had eradicated all illness and disease, another that they had closed the prisons and reduced the crime rate to zero. Earth’s delegates sat there embarrassed. Finally their leader rose to his feet and said with regret that no such progress had been made on earth. In fact, he had nothing important to report except one small thing. At a point in history God visited the earth. The others stared at him in amazement. “You say that God visited the earth? Why earth? How did you receive him? What did you do with him?” Earth’s delegate hung his head in shame and said, “Actually we killed him.... But he rose again.... God visited the earth.”

That is the Gospel, the ‘good news’, as new today as it was two thousand years ago. It proclaims that God was in Christ. God, who created the earth, at a time in history visited the earth and acted not only for our benefit but for the salvation of the whole human race. We are not being dogmatic when we say that. We know that we live in a pluralist age when God is called by many names and there are many ways to worship and serve him. We are Christians, however, and for us Jesus Christ is the way to God, the truth about God, and the life of God made visible and brought within our experience.

That’s why Augustine College plays such a vital role in the larger society and in the future of its graduates. There was a time when all higher education in the western world had its roots in the Christian Gospel, as symbolized by the

central position of the chapel in every college campus. In this secular age the chapel has been relegated, if not to the periphery of the campus, certainly to the periphery of its life and thought. Augustine has reacted, not by creating a fundamentalist enclave but by creating what someone called “a thinking Christian community” where the Gospel is not a subject to be studied but the essential framework of all study. By giving students the Gospel of Christ, Augustine prepares them not only for university but for life.

TEACHING

To the graduates let me say next that if you want the 21st Century to be rich for you in the things that really matter,

don't forget to take the teachings of Jesus Christ.

It is believed that the Ark of the Covenant contained the teachings of Moses, the two stone tablets inscribed with the original Ten Commandments that God revealed to him amid the smoke and fire and thunder and trumpet blast of Mount Sinai. ‘Thou shalt not kill, steal, commit adultery,’ etc. At that time those laws were the highest moral wisdom ever given to the human race and they have been the basis of many civilizations and legal systems. After the Second World War, when statesmen were searching for a basis on which to reconstruct a world which had fallen apart, Elton Trueblood, the Quaker philosopher, proposed the Ten Commandments in a book which he called *Foundations for Reconstruction*.

That's exactly what they were intended to be. Jesus himself endorsed every one of those laws. He said, “not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen shall disappear from the law....” Yet he himself went beyond that old negative morality and enunciated a new, positive morality

of love, forgiveness, compassion and service which, if it were practised on a large enough scale, would redeem the whole of society and transform our human relationships. I heard that thought expressed by a psychiatrist who led some of us in a worship service in the Church of the Beatitudes overlooking the Sea of Galilee. He told us that most mental disorders arise out of wrong relationships and he went through the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, saying that they are all expressions of the love which is the secret of right relationships. He added, “This is still a new morality. Most of my patients have not heard of it or, if they have heard, they have never seriously practised it in their lives.”

One person who did and does practise it is Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States. He wrote a book with a title that might well be a motto for all graduates, *Why Not the Best?* He got the idea from Vice-Admiral Hyman Rickover, who interviewed him when he was a student at Naval Academy. When Carter said that he thought his academic standing was good enough, the Admiral retorted, “Why not the best?” That became Carter's philosophy of life – not only as a student but as a person, business man, politician, president, and peacemaker. Carter is a committed Christian. He teaches a Sunday School class every week and did so even during his Presidency. For him the best is Jesus Christ and the teachings of Christ the highest moral wisdom ever given to the human race. I propose that those teachings are the ark that we must take with us into the 21st century if we want it to be rich in the things that really matter.

CALLING

Allow me to display one more facet of my proposition and to say to the graduates that, if you want your future to be rich in the things that

really matter, you will take with you not only the Gospel and the teaching but also

the calling of Jesus Christ.

There was a time when we restricted the concept of ‘calling’ to a career in the church.

A person was supposed to feel ‘called’ to the priesthood or the ministry, but not to careers in law, medicine, engineering, education, or other professions. That surely was a narrow view of Christian vocation and scarcely consistent with the New Testament. To be sure, some Christians are called to preach the Gospel and lead the church, but all Christians, whatever their function in life, are called to obey and serve Jesus Christ.

Here my proposition becomes very personal, especially for these fine young men and women. It raises the question,

What are you going to do with your life?

You may go to university next year but what are you going to do with all the years after that? Let me change the question and ask, If you suddenly won or inherited a sum of several million dollars, what would you do with it? How would you spend all that wealth? You are already wealthier than that because you have something that all the money in the world cannot buy. You have your whole adult lifetime ahead of you which, if you are given good health, will extend through most of the 21st century. And you can do with it exactly what you could do with that money bonanza – hoard it, squander it, invest it wisely, or dedicate it to Jesus Christ.

Reading the Gospels, have you ever paid attention to the crucial choices that Jesus set

before people? He told them that a life built on his teaching is like a house built on rock, whereas one not built on his teaching is like a house built on sand. The first will stand during a flood and the second will collapse. We have to choose the foundation on which to build. He said also that there are two ways to travel through this world, and we have to choose between them – a broad way that leads to destruction and a narrow way that leads to life. He said that we cannot serve two masters; we must choose between God and money, treasures in heaven or treasures on earth.

The ultimate choice is one of loyalty: “He that is not with me is against me.” There is no neutrality in the Christian life. We are for Jesus or against him. That’s what the Christian calling is all about.

That is my word to you, the graduates of Augustine College, as you stand on the threshold of a century and a new stage of life with all its opportunities and challenges. You have not passed this way before but don’t shrink back or be afraid of the unknown future. You may have to leave some precious things behind, but they will not be lost in your memory or in the purpose of God. Above all, go with God, with the Gospel, the teaching and the calling of his Son Jesus Christ. Let the past give up to you all the assurance of Christ that it contains. Set that assurance before you.

Don’t forget the ark.

Take what is best from the past, and then the future will open for you the best, the deepest, and the richest blessings that God has yet to give.