

The Complete text of his speech follows:

President Jenkins, distinguished Governor of the State of Maryland, members of the faculty of this great institution, members of the graduating class, ladies and gentlemen:

I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to be here this afternoon and to be a part of this commencement exercise.

You, the graduates of Morgan State College, today bid farewell to these hallowed grounds; grounds which will remain dear to you so long as the cords of memory shall lengthen.

You prepare now to enter the clamorous highways of life. Now you are aware of the fact that you are finishing college in one of the most exciting and momentous periods in human history.

You have the privilege of standing between two worlds – the dying old, and the emerging new.

So, in a real sense, this is a great time to be alive. That is the subject for what I plan to say to you this afternoon and I will use the subject – A great time to be alive.

* * *

Now I am aware of the fact that there are those who would say to you that you are finishing college in a most ghastly period of human history.

They would contend that the rhythmic beat of ..the deep rumblings of discontent from Asia, the uprisings in Africa, the social and political crisis facing France as a result of the Algerian situation, and the racial tensions of America, culminating in the presence of Federal troops in Little Rock, Arkansas, are all indicative of the deep and desolate midnight, which encompasses our civilization.

They would say to you that we are moving backwards instead of forward;

That we are retrogressing instead of progressing.

But far from representing retrogression and tragic meaninglessness, the present tensions represent the usual pains that accompany the birth of anything new.

They seem to be both historically and biologically true; that there can be no birth and growth without birth and growing pains.

Whenever we confront the emergence of the new, that is the recalcitrance of the old.

And so tensions which we witness in the world today are indicative of the fact that a new world is coming into being, and an old world is passing away.

* * *

Now, we are all familiar with the old world – the old order that is passing away, we have seen it, and we have lived with it.

We have seen it in all of its dimensions, we have seen it in its international dimensions in the form of colonialism and imperialism.

As you know, there are approximately two billion five hundred million people in this world, and about two-thirds of them are colored people living mainly on two continents – Asia and Africa.

About one billion six hundred million – the peoples of the world are colored – six hundred million in China, 400 hundred million in India and Pakistan, 200 million in Africa, a hundred million in Indonesia, more than 86 million in Japan.

For years, most of these people were dominated by some foreign power, they were exploited economically, dominated politically, segregated and humiliated.

There comes a time that people get tired. There comes a time people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression.

* * *

There comes a time, as it were, that people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July, and left standing in the piercing chill of an Alpine November.

These people became tired, and they decided to protest against that oppression.

And as a result of that, about 1 billion three hundred million of the 1 billion 6 hundred million forms of colonial subjects have achieved their independence. As they look back, they see the old order of colonialism passing away – the new order of freedom and justice coming into being.

I remember about a year ago seeing something of this first hand, and then to what was then the Gold Coast to the Independence celebration.

I never will forget the experience that came to all of us on that night, that the old nation was to pass away and a new nation to come into being.

I remember as we stood out there where hundreds and thousands of people assembled, waiting for the old flag to go down and the new flag to go up.

I remember that moment when the union type flag came down, you could hear echoing all across that vast crowd of people – the words – FREEDOM, FREEDOM, FREEDOM!

* * *

As those words came out, tears began to pour from my eyes. On my right was standing Dr. Ralph Bunch, and on my left was standing my wife and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell.

And as I looked around to them, I could also see tears pouring forth.

And I turned around and said to Adam Powell – “these are the events that we will forever remember – it is not a meaningless drama, taking place on the stage of history – it symbolizes something.” That old flag coming down symbolizes an old age passing away.

“That new flag of Ghana going up symbolizes a new age coming into being. The old order of colonialism is passing away and the new order of freedom and justice is coming into being.”

* * *

Not only have we seen the old order in its international dimensions, we have seen it in our own nation, in the form of segregation and discrimination.

We all know that the law of history of the old order in America, it had its beginning in 1619 when the first colored slaves landed on the shores of this nation – unlike the Pilgrim fathers who landed at Plymouth a year later, they were brought here against their will.

It is true that in about 1862, the colored persons were emancipated, but it was a strict emancipation, for emancipation only accepted the colored person as a legal fact, not as a first-class citizen or as a person.

So there is no wonder that a new form of slavery would come into being in 1896, with legal and constitutional validity. It was in that year, that the Supreme Court issued the “separate but equal” doctrine – the Plessy vs. Ferguson decision.

* * *

Living under the systems of slavery and segregation, many colored persons lost faith in themselves.

Many come to feel that perhaps they were inferior.

This is always the danger and the tragedy of segregation, it not only harms one physically, but it scars the soul and distorts the personality.

Then something happened to the colored person – circumstances made it possible and necessary for him to travel more. The coming of the automobile, the upheavals of two world wars and the great depression.

His rural plantation background, gradually gave way to urban industrial life, his cultural life was gradually rising through the steady decline of crippling illiteracy.

All of these forces conjoined to cause the colored man to take a new look at himself. Colored masses all over began to re-evaluate themselves.

* * *

The colored person came to feel that he was somebody. His religion revealed to him that God loved all of His children and that all men are made in his image – so he came to see at this point that the important thing about a man is not his specificity but his fundamentum;

Not the texture of his hair nor the color of his skin, but the texture and quality of his soul. Even now unconsciously cry out with the eloquent force – “Fleecy locks and black complexion cannot forfeit nature’s claims; skin may differ, but affection dwells in black and white the same.

“Why so tall as to reach the pole or to grasp the ocean at a stand. I must be measured by my soul, the mind is a standard of the man.”

With this new sense of dignity and new self-respect, the new colored person came into being.

* * *

Along with this, something else happened.

The Supreme Court came out with another decision.

The Supreme Court of the nation, which in 1857 had rendered the Dred Scott Decision; the Supreme Court, which in 1896, had rendered the Plessy vs. Ferguson decision, came out in May 17, 1954, with a new decision, saying in substance: that the old Plessy doctrine must go; that separate facilities are inherently unequal;

That the segregated child on the basis of his race, is to deny that child equal protection of the law.

As a result of this decision, we see the whole order of segregation passing away and the new order coming into being.

To put it in difficult language: We broke loose from the Egypt of slavery – we move through the wilderness of separate but equal, now we stand on the border of the promised land of integration – the old order of segregation is passing away, and the new order of democratic equalitarianism is coming into being.

* * *

Let nobody fool you. All the loud noises that we hear today in terms in interposition and nullification are merely the death groans from a dying system – the old order is passing away.

But now that a new world is coming into being of a new order, we must not stop here for when new developments take place in history, they bring with them new responsibilities, and new challenges.

It would be tragic, indeed, if you would go out into the world failing to see the new responsibilities of this new order.

So, as you go out into your various professions, into your various areas of activity, I would like to suggest to you some of the responsibilities that we face as a result of the emergence of this new order:

* * *

First, we are challenged to rise above the narrow confines of our individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.

In this new world, no individual or no nation can live alone. The new world is a world of geographical togetherness – we must make it a world of spiritual togetherness.

Now it is quite true that the geographical togetherness of this new world has been brought into being, largely because of man's scientific ingenuity; man through his scientific genius has been able to dwarf distance and place time in chains.

Yes, he's been able to carve highways through the stratosphere, so that it is possible today to eat breakfast today in New York City and supper in Paris, France.

* * *

There is another final challenge:

We're challenged to enter the new age with understanding goodwill in our hearts.

To my mind this is even more important than the other two.

I'm simply saying that we must enter this new age with the Christian virtues of love, forgiveness and mercy in our hearts.

A few weeks ago, I was flying from Paris to New York City – it was a non-stop flight – 13 hours – as we were crossing the Atlantic, I remember very vividly some words that the pilot said to me.

He said, in about a year from now, this same flight will be made in about 6 ½ or 7 hours.

He went on to say that we have already jet-propelled planes on this airlines – this was TWA, most of the airlines in America, and of the world have ordered jet places, so that we would be able to cut the distance in half.

I started thinking as he talked with me that it would be possible – a year from now, to get up on Saturday morning and run up to New York City, take a non-stop flight from New York to Paris, and later while the evening in Paris for a fitting fir a beautiful outfit and be back on Sunday morning to wear it to church. (Here the audience laughs).
audience laughs).

live in.

You know Bob Hope has described this new jet age. He said, it's an age in which it will be possible to take a non-stop flight from Los Angeles to New York City, maybe on taking off in Los Angeles you develop hiccups, you will "Hic" in Los Angeles and "cup" in New York City (Laughter).

* * *

This is the new age.

An age in which it will be possible to take a non-stop flight from Tokyo on Sunday morning because of the time difference in arriving in Seattle, Washington, on the preceding Saturday nite and when your friends meet you at the airport and ask when did you leave Tokyo. You will have to say I left tomorrow. (Laughter).

This is a bit humorous, and I hope I am laughing something basic in all of us. I'm simply saying that we're living in a world today that is geographically one. We must make it spiritually one.

Man, through his scientific genius, has been able to make of this world a neighborhood. If we are to survive, we must make of it a brotherhood.

We must learn to live together as brothers or we will all die together as fools.

* * *

We are caught and involved in a single process. Whatever affects one directly, it affects all indirectly in this world. We are clothed in a single garment of destiny;

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. So long as hundreds and thousands of people go to bed hungry at night, I can never be rich – even if I have a billion dollars – so long as the life expectancy and millions of people in this world, no more than 35 years, I can never be totally healthy.

Even if I get a good checkup at Johns Hopkins or Mayo Clinic – I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. We are tied together in a single process.

John Dunn said years ago, and he would cry out: “No man is an island entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continental part of the main.”

Then as he comes to the conclusion, he says: “Any man’s death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind; therefore never sin to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.” This is one of the responsibilities. This is one of the challenges of this hour.

* * *

There is another thing that I would like to say to you:

We are challenged to achieve excellency in our various fields of endeavor.

Those of you who graduate today have opportunities that did not come to your mothers and fathers. Doors are opening today that were not opened yesterday. The challenge of this hour is to be ready to enter these doors when they open.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said in an essay back in 1871 that: “If a man can write a better book or preach a better sermon or make a better mousetrap than his neighbor, even if he builds his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door.”

This will become increasingly true. So we must be prepared to enter these doors as they open.

* * *

Then in this new age we must get ready to compete with people – no colored people, but people.

And if you’re going out to be a good colored person or anything, you have already flunked your matriculation examination for entrance in the University of Integration.

Don’t go out to be a good colored doctor;

Don’t go out to be a good colored school teacher;

Don’t go out to be a good colored lawyer;

Don’t go out to be a good colored preacher;

Don’t go out to be a good colored skilled laborer – go out to do a good job. Do it well. (Applause). This is the challenge of the hour. Do it so well nobody could do it better.

Do it as if God Almighty called you at this particular moment in history to do it.

Do it so well that the living, the dead and unborn could not do it better.

* * *

Carried to one extreme, if it befalls your luck to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Raphael painting pictures;

Sweep streets like Bethoven composed music;

Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry;
Sweep streets so well that all of the hosts of Heaven and earth will have to pause and say,
here lived a great street sweeper – he swept his job well;
If you can't be a pile on the top of the hill, be a shrub in the valley, but be the best shrub
on the side of the hill;
Be a bush if you can't be a tree;
If you can't be a highway, be a trail.
If you can't be the sun, be a star, for it isn't by size that you win or you fail, be the best of
whatever you are.

This is the second challenge facing us in this new age.

* * *

We must work passionately and unrelentingly for first-class citizenship.
And, we must never use second-class methods to gain it.
I know this is difficult advice.
I know the temptation that comes to all of us.
Those of us who have been trampled over so long;
Those of us who have been the victims of injustice;
Those of us who have had to stand amid the viciousness of lynch mobs;
Those of us who have had to stand amid bombings; there is the temptation for us to enter
the new age with bitterness in our hearts.

* * *

I know the temptation, but if we enter the new age with this attitude, the new order,
which is emerging would be nothing but a duplication of the old order.
Somebody must have sense enough to cut off the chain of hate in the universe.
Somebody must have sense enough to meet hate with love.
Somebody must have sense enough to meet physical force with soul force. I think this is
the challenge facing us at this hour.
This is why I believe so firmly in the way of love and non-violence.

* * *

It is my firm belief that if the colored person succumbs to the temptation of using
violence in his struggle for justice, unborn generations will be the recipient of long and desolate
nights of bitterness. And our chief legacy to the future would be an endless reign of meaningless
chaos.

There is still a voice, crying even at this hour, crying through the vistas of time, saying to
every potential Peter, put up your sword.

History is replete with the deep bones of nations; history is cluttered with the wreckage of
communities, and fails to follow his command.

So I believe firmly that we must enter the new age with understanding, goodwill, with
love in our hearts.

* * *

I know you're raising the question right now, you're saying to me, Brother King, it's hard
to love those people who oppose you, these people who are trampling over you, those people
who are oppressing you. How in the world can you do that?

I realize that it is hard, it is difficult, it is not an easy thing.

But let me rush on to say that when I speak of loving those who oppose you, I'm not speaking of a sentimental affectionate type of love.

It's impossible to have a sentimental affection of love for those people who are trampling over you and those people who are bombing your homes and your churches and your synagogues, and what-have-you.

It's just difficult to have an affectionate love – but I'm not speaking of that.

I think the Greek language comes to our aid at this point. You know in Greek you have three words for love. The Greek language speaks of "Eros."

Eros is a sort of esthetic love Plato speaks about a great deal in his dialogues – yearning of the soul for the realm of the divine.

It has come to us to be a sort of romantic love. And so all of us know about Eros. We have experienced it, we have lived with it.

* * *

I imagine Edgar Allan Poe was speaking of Eros, when he talked about his beautiful Annabelle Lee with a love surrounded by the halo of eternity.

I think Shakespeare was speaking something of Eros when he said: "Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove:

"It is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken; It is a star to every wandering bark..."

You know I can remember that very well because I used to quote it to my wife when we were courting. (laughter). That's Eros.

Then the Greek language talks about Philiias, which is a sort of an affectionate love between personal friends.

This is a love you have for your roommate – you love people because you like them – it is a reciprocal love. You love people because you have something in common, because you can communicate together because you like each other.

* * *

Then the Greek language comes out with another word, it is the word, Agape. Agape is more than Eros; Agape is more than Philiias. Agape is understanding creative, repentive goodwill and all of these. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return.

Theologians would say that it is the love of God working in the lives of individuals. So when we rise to love on this level, we love men not because we like them, not because their ways appeal to us, but because God loves them.

I think this is what Jesus meant when he said: "Love your enemies..." I'm very happy he didn't say 'like' your enemies. Some people think it's pretty difficult to 'like.' Jesus said 'love' them. 'Like' is a sentimental, affectionate sort of thing. But 'love' is understanding created with difficult will.

When you rise to true arbitrary love – you love the person who does the evil deed, while hating the deed that the person does.

* * *

I think this is the thing that must guide us along; this attitude that we will be able to go into the new age and make this new age a truly meaningful new age.

We will go into the new age with the proper attitude, we will not go into the new age with the psychology of victors – even when we win decisions in Federal Courts and the Supreme Court.

We will not take the myriad victors for the colored people.

We will come to see that they are victories for justice and victories for democracy.

The tension is at bottom – not one between colored and white people – the tension is between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. This is the thing that will guide us along.

* * *

If we go out into the new era with this attitude, we will not substitute a black supremacy for white supremacy.

For I tell you this evening, God is not interested in freedom of black men, brown men and yellow men. God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race created in this society where all men will live together as brothers and respect the dignity and worth of all human personality.

I believe that through love and unbiased, we will be able to go into the new age with the proper attitude.

I want you to notice another basic thing:

All that I have said to you this afternoon reminds us – or rather tells us something about our universe. Tells us something about the core and heartbeat of the moral cosmos;

Reminds us somehow that the universe is on the side of the forces of justice, the forces of truth and the forces of righteousness.

Reminds us that the Arc of the Lord's universe may be long but it bends towards justice.

It says to us in substance that in the struggle, in the transition from the old age to the new age, we have cosmic companionship.

As you go out into your various areas, take this conviction with you, I don't know what you want to call it – call it what you may – call it a principle of concretion – call it an ope of concretion – Call it an impersonal power of integration – call it being itself.

I would rather call it a personal law that found its power of infinite love – but call it what you may – whatever you call it, there is something within this universe that works to bring together the disconnected aspects of reality into the harmonious home.

There is a power that seeks to bring low gigantic mountains of evil and prodigious hilltops of injustice.

If you go out with the conviction, you can move from the old age into the new age with an inner security – the tensions that will inevitably come in the transition will not push you down.

* * *

The tidal waves of threats and intimidation that will come to you as you try to move from the old order into the new order, will not break you down, because you have that inner security.

Go out with the conviction that there is something in this universe which justifies Carlyle insaying: "Nobody can live forever."

Go out with the conviction that there is something in this universe that justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying: "Truth crushed to earth will rise again."

Go out with the conviction that there is something in this universe that justifies James Russell Lowell in saying: "Truth forever on the scaffold – ride forever on the throne – if that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own."

* * *

So down in Montgomery, Alabama we can walk and never get weary, because we know there is a great camp meeting in the promised land of freedom and justice.

This is the conviction that keeps you going.

Now I'm closing – but you've misunderstood everything I've said. I can look in your faces and see that. I can look in your eyes and see that you've misunderstood my message.

I've talked about this new age coming into being. And I've almost implied that since God is on the side of the new age, it is inevitable.

And so I can look in your eyes and see that you're saying – you can go home now; sit down and do nothing and wait on the coming of the inevitable.

If you leave these hallowed grounds with that conviction, you will leave the victims of a dangerous optimism.

If you go away with that conviction, you will be the victims of an illusion wrapped in superficiality.

* * *

Let me say to you this evening that social progress is never inevitable. It is not only on the wheels of inevitability.

Without this persistent work, time itself becomes the ally of the insurgent and primitive forces of irrational emotionalism and social stagnation.

So I say to you, go out, not as detached spectators, but as individuals involved in the struggle, ready to cooperate with God, ready to cooperate with the forces of the universe, and make the new world a reality.

Go out determined to make the ideals of brotherhood a reality for your generation and for your children and for your children's children, and this will be the great day in our world with this attitude and with this work, we will be able, by the grace of God, to create a new America.

* * *

In a few years from now, you will be able to sing a new vim, "My Country t'is of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing; land where my father's died, land of the Pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

That must become literally true.

Freedom must ring from every mountainside – yes, let it ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire;

Let it ring from the mighty mountains of New York;

Let it ring from the heightening Alleghanys of Pennsylvania;

Let it ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado;

* * *

Let it ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that, from every mountainside, let freedom ring!

So let it ring from the Stone Mountain of Georgia;

Let it ring from Look Out Mountain of Tennessee;

Let it ring from every hill and mole hill of Mississippi;

Let it ring from every mountain of Alabama – from every mountainside – let freedom ring!

And when this happens, all men will be able to stand together, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, and sing a new song – Free at last, free at last, great God Almighty, we are free at last! (Thunderous applause)