

**Address at the St. Mary's Diocesan School for Girls  
Senior School Prize Giving Ceremony**

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**St. Mary's, Pretoria**

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## Introduction

The Headmaster, Father Angus Paterson

The Chairperson of the Board of Governors, Bishop Jo Seoka, and Members of the Board

The Vice-Principals, teachers and support staff

Parents and students

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

Molweni, dumelang, good morning/afternoon, goeie more/dag

It is a great honour to be invited to address this gathering of St. Mary's Diocesan School for Girls and to celebrate the achievements of the School and its students.

Whenever, the invitation stems from an Old Rhodian, a graduate of Rhodes University, as is Father Paterson, who also exercises wonderful leadership in the great responsibility of educating our youth it becomes an especial pleasure to be in your midst.

## Recognition

To begin with, permit me, headmaster, to congratulate St. Mary's for the kind and quality of education that you provide.

Seventeen years into our democracy we continue to be plagued by an education *system* that is in perennial crisis and tragically thwarts the realization of the talents and potential of the youth of our society. You are among the 10% of schools that our country relies upon for 60% of the students that can enter university.

‘Education,’ as the great Irish poet and Nobel Prize for Literature winner William Butler Yeats observed ‘is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.’

It is also a *partnership* between teachers, students and parents of mutual commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, to the development of expertise and skills, and to the embrace of appropriate values and attitudes.

St. Mary’s embraces Yeats dictum and also exemplifies a strong partnership between teachers, students and parents based on core values. These are the indispensable conditions for success.

Congratulations to all the prize winners on your tremendous achievements. You have displayed the necessary commitment to learn, to acquire knowledge, to develop expertise and to strive to excel.

You will, I trust, acknowledge the contributions of your teachers and all the various support staff of the College, who create an environment to support you and to enable you to succeed.

You will, hopefully, also recognize your parents, guardians, families and benefactors, all of whom generously contribute to your receiving a St. Andrew's education and to your success.

### **On 'race'**

I wish to use this address to reflect on the important issue of 'race' in our society and on the forthcoming international conference in Durban on climate change, environment and sustainability, and to share some thoughts with you in these regards.

In his new book, *South Africa Pushed to the Limit*, the insightful Hein Marais warns of the danger of the 'recourse (on the part of some) to rousing affirmations of identity and entitlement' and to populist discourses of 'authenticity' – 'who is a real South African, who is a real African, who is black, what is a man, what is the role of women.' These utterances, he notes, are accompanied by ever more 'narrow and exacting' interpretations of culture and tradition.<sup>1</sup>

Marais' comments help to put into perspective certain events.

One is the crass utterances of chief government communicator Jimmy Manyi on 'race'. Another is the repugnant tabloid chatter of Kuli Roberts on so-called Coloureds. A third is Minister Trevor Manuel's amazing outburst that Manyi has 'the same mind that operated under apartheid', and does not appreciate that his 'utterances are both unconstitutional and morally reprehensible.'<sup>2</sup>

Given the apartheid legacy, we can have no quarrel with redress and social equity for economically and socially disadvantaged poor, black and women South Africans. As Judge Albie Sachs notes, pervasive inequities 'cannot be wished away by invoking constitutional idealism.'<sup>iii</sup>

Still, we find ourselves in the grip of a profound paradox: the use of 'race' to promote redress and to advance social equity.

Such an approach has many dangers. For one, employing solely 'race' for redress purposes could benefit only or primarily black political and economic elites, and simply reinforce the severe class inequalities that we already have in South Africa.

The conspicuous consumption of our off-the-body sushi-loving elites and the rapid ascendancy of politically-connected elites into hugely wealthy businesspersons make no difference to eliminating the massive inequalities in our society.

For another, using 'race' to advance redress and social equity can harden racial categorisations and result in us continuing to construct our identities primarily along the lines of 'race'<sup>iv</sup>

Surely our goal as well as our policies must be to erode and dissolve racial categorisations, and ensure that our identities are rich, multiple, fluid and dynamic rather than frozen along lines of 'race'.

Our goal must be ‘a non-racial society in which social and cultural diversity is celebrated and seen as a source of vitality, and in which race as such ultimately has no political or economic significance.’<sup>v</sup>

In the fabulous and inspiring track called ‘Say Africa’, Vusi Mahlasela croons:

I may be walking in the streets of London...or Amsterdam...or New York  
But the dust on my boots and the rhythm of my feet and my heart say  
Africa, say Africa

I walk the streets of London, Amsterdam, New York, Oslo, Stockholm and other cities regularly to popularise Rhodes, meet alumni and donors and raise funds for Rhodes. But, indeed, ‘the dust on my boots and the rhythm of my feet and my heart say Africa, say Africa.’ I know this is the case for many, nay, most of you.

We must not remain silent in the face of the misguided and the charlatans and chauvinists among us who stridently seek to give ever more ‘narrow and exacting’ answers to the questions of ‘who is a real South African, who is a real African, who is *black*, what is a *man*, (and) what is the role of women.’

We have only recently won a wonderful new Constitution and Bill of Rights that guarantee us citizenship and human rights. Self-serving answers to questions of ‘who is a *real* South African’, ‘what is the role of women’ and the like, could strip millions of us of fundamental human rights and reduce us to subjects.

It is this kind of chauvinist thinking that leads to the killing fields of My Lai, Srebrenica, Darfur and Rwanda, and fertilises our own disgraceful manifestations of xenophobia.

We must loudly proclaim, as does our Constitution, that 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.' We must insist, for all the reasons that were given at the 'I am an African' speech at the launch of our Constitution, that we are all Africans.

At the same time, we have to jettison glib formulations like 'forget the past and embrace the future,' and not confuse aspiration with realities, as in simplistic assertions that we are the 'rainbow nation.'

Njabulo Ndebele notes that 'the fact that racism may still exist in the actions of young students...suggests that racism continues to be fed by institutions such as families, schools and churches.' As parents, we need to give attention to how 'we bring up our children.'<sup>vi</sup>

We have a long road still to travel before we can declare that racism and sexism, and prejudice and intolerance have been defeated, and that we are truly a united, non-racial and non-sexist society.

Issues of race, culture, identity, language and many kinds of hurt remain to be confronted. We will only become truly free and equals when we begin to tackle the issue of 'difference' with sensitivity, honesty and courage, and begin to respect and embrace diversity in all its rich and myriad forms.

We shy away from open and honest engagement with these difficult, complex and emotive issues at our own peril.

## **Environment and sustainability**

Students, ladies and gentlemen: In late November some 30 000 people from around the world will descend on Durban for the Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP 17) on the environment and sustainability.

For centuries we have plundered our planet, decimated countless species and habitats and wrought huge environmental damage. Quite rightly, there is now deep concern about how we interact with nature. Finally, if belatedly, we are becoming acutely aware that our natural environment is hugely important to our quality of life and that of future generations.

Given the scientific evidence, it is vital that we – you and I as individuals, you as St. Mary's, we as Rhodes - begin to mitigate our damage of the atmosphere, land, forests, rivers, lake and seas; that we begin to innovate adaptive strategies in response to changes that are occurring because of climate change, and that we navigate new pathways and develop new models to address the needs of human subsistence.

There is no other way – not if we wish to leave a world that our children, grandchildren and their children can inhabit without threats of great calamities that will be a consequence of our reckless degradation of our natural environment.

At the same time it must be hoped that our growing concern with our abuse and damage of our natural world - the environmental injustice that we perpetrate - will also extend to our continued unconscionable treatment of our fellow humans.

Indeed, the violence that we do to nature is often connected to the violence we do to fellow humans; frequently the rationales are the same and the key actors are the same.

Having failed, to win the rugby world cup we have nonetheless triumphed in the dubious honour of now being the most unequal society on earth.

Already a perversely unequal society in 1994, during the past seventeen years income inequality has increased in general and within so-called 'racial' groups.

The percentage of income of the poorest 20% of our society has fallen since 1994. Conversely, the percentage of income of the richest 20% of our society has risen since 1994.

The poorest 20% earn 1.7% of income; the richest 20% take home 72.5%. 43% of our fellow citizens eke out an existence on an annual income of less than R 3 000 per year – that is R8.22 a day.

If it were not for state social grants, death through hunger and starvation would join HIV-AIDS as a leading cause of mortality in South Africa.

The struggle for environmental sustainability and the struggle for people to lead rich, decent, productive, free and rewarding lives - environmental justice and social justice is *indivisible* - two sides of the same coin.

On the final page of *Long Walk to Freedom*, Tatamkulu Nelson Mandela writes:

The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed

For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others

The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.

He adds: 'I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended'.

'The truth is that' in 2011

- We are yet to 'live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others,' and is also respectful of our natural environment
- The extent of 'our devotion to freedom' and an inclusive citizenship, including the freedom of all from want and to a life of dignity remains to be seen
- The idea that 'with freedom comes responsibilities' to advance the common social good seems to be lost on too many in positions of economic and political power.

Indeed, the 'long walk' to full citizenship rights for all in a just, non-racial non-sexist, and democratic society 'is not yet ended.' 'We dare not linger' too long in in our walk to freedom for all, for there will be grave costs if we do.

## **In Closing**

Dear students: You are a generation that has been, thankfully, largely spared the horrors, the brutality and the injustices of apartheid.

You are a generation that has the unequalled opportunity and freedom to re-imagine and reshape our future.

We look to you to free us from the obsession with 'race' and colour and to forge new ways of interacting and new identities. We also look to you to innovate ways of living symbiotically and in peace with our natural world.

I am confident that you will rise to the challenges of the future.

You have the privilege of studying at a very special school, one that commands an enviable academic reputation and which seeks to develop in you, in the lovely words of the Headmaster a 'quest to become more than we are, daily.'

This and the values that St. Mary's seeks to cultivate – equality, honesty, tolerance, commitment, responsibility, co-operation, respect for self and others – is a solid foundation for you to navigate the future with confidence.

I look forward to having some of you at Rhodes University in coming years and I wish you all the best for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Marais, H. (2011) *South Africa Pushed to the Limit: The Political Economy of Change*. Claremont: UCT Press

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thestar.co.za/trevor-manuel-s-open-letter-to-jimmy-manyi-1.1034606>

<sup>iii</sup> Sachs, A. (2006) Foreword in Kennedy-Dubourdieu, E (2006) *Race and Inequality: World Perspectives on Affirmative Action*. Hampshire: Ashgate; page x

<sup>iv</sup> Alexander, N. (2007) 'Affirmative Action and the Perpetuation of Racial Identities in Post-Apartheid South Africa.' *Transformation*, No. 63

<sup>v</sup> Ibid., page xi

<sup>vi</sup> Sharon Dell, S. (2011) 'South Africa: Njabulo Ndebele on labels and leadership'. University World News, Issue: 165, 3 April