



SOMERVILLE

COLLEGE

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Dear Friends, Welcome to final Choral Contemplation of Trinity Term 2021.

Of all 24 events I am responsible for organising with my colleague, the Director of Chapel Music, Will Dawes, I feel the Leavers' Service is the most important one. I say this, because this is the last opportunity for us to influence a new generation of problem solvers. Therefore, we're gathered here today for the traditional event of Leavers Service, which in addition to several fantastic contributions from the choir, includes reflections from the JCR and the MCR. And quite importantly, parting words for the academic year delivered by our college Principal. Today, we would also be saying goodbye to quite a few exceptional members of the choir – these are, Katie Bastiman who has been with us since 2016, Miriam Remshard, Finlay Dove and Max Rodney – who have been with us since 2018, and Jonny Boyd who joined us last year. Unfortunately, that's not it – two of our more experienced Organ Scholars would also be moving on to the next stage of their lives. Melissa Chang, who has been with us since 2018 will be on the organ one final time, playing Mendelssohn's fantastic piece to close the event for today. And Joseph Lord who is a resident scholar with Mansfield College this year, but has been with us since 2017. Our Choral Contemplations would not have been possible, without each of their irreplaceable contributions – the delightful music they created, beautifully complemented readings and what our guest speakers had to say. This Chapel, your college, fellow students and members of staff, are grateful for your contributions.

But before I make way for the choir to perform an enchanting piece describing the experience of leaving a beloved time and place – I'd ask for your patience to do two things – 1. Congratulate you, and 2. Share details of a job advertisement you're already being considered for.

First, many congratulations to all the students who have successfully completed their studies this year. You must be very proud of what you have achieved in an already competitive environment, made even more difficult by a wretched virus. Our community was tested, like many others, during the pandemic, but the manner in which you came together to support one another, kept a high sense of morale and continued with your personal and academic mission, demonstrates that no matter the challenge Somervillians possess what it takes to succeed.

Turning to my second point – In case you haven't noticed, we are amidst a leadership crisis. There's a shortage of leaders capable of cutting through party lines and ideologies to address some of the very real problems we face today. Despite headline figures circulated by central banks and governments, the ground reality is that severe inequities continue to exist, we continue to live in an unsustainable fashion – taking this planet and the nature for granted, we're ignorant to the interconnected nature of humanity and our leaders continue with the old school approach of grandstanding and pushing agendas.

Countless vacancies of compassionate and decisive leaders in countries, businesses, charities and public services, are up for grabs. I cannot tell you when is it that you'll be interviewed for the position that will enable you to fully realise your potential and fulfil your purpose – but I can tell you with absolute surety that the opportunity will come. And when it does, you won't have the time to prepare. Just like our political leaders didn't have the time to revise healthcare policy curriculum when the pandemic started. Let alone prepare, you can't even predict which problem it is that you'll have to solve – perhaps you'd have to think about governance in space, retraining millions of oil & gas workers for an electric age, promoting wellbeing in a perpetual cycle of pandemics, perhaps leadership would be all about building bridges in an increasingly opinionated world....you just don't know. All you can do is cultivate your inner self – so when the question is asked, you're able to summon all that you have to offer, to work in a concentrated way and ready to give marching orders to those who will look up to you. In preparation for today's event, I was looking back at an address given by Helen Derbyshire - who was the principal of our college until the end of the second world war.

I am grateful for Anne and Matthew from our college library, who helped me find her address in the Chapel Archives. In her remarks on 10th October 1939 titled – Cultivation of the Inner Life, she said, *“We live in a time when to know what we aim at has a special urgency. The practical needs of this disjointed, battered world, after four years of War, stare us in the face, and Plans and Planning and Practical working outs of the Plan have assumed a place in the very forefront of our aims. What I want to urge is that they are not the most important things of all. There is a danger that we should think they are. The most important thing of all, and fundamental the only thing that matters, is the spirit in which we live – not what we do, but the quality of our living. Plans and schemes and systems are of no use unless the human life within them is worthy of the human spirit”*.

Friends, I put it to you that we’re facing an equal sense of urgency, a leadership crisis – which students graduating from Somerville are uniquely qualified to address. Because in addition to developing your skills, you have used this Chapel to cultivate your inner self. You have used our intentionally interfaith, and not just multi-faith, leaning, to understand your beliefs and those of others – so when needed, you’ll be a force to be reckoned with, unstoppable in your pursuit to build bridges.

In a world, where populists would have you classify everyone with broad strokes into left or right, you hold the fine paintbrush that’s needed to create art on a seemingly messy canvas. You possess the respectful and patient will, along with goodness of heart to decisively solve some of the most contentious issues, resisting peer pressure that relentlessly incentivises us to “take it easy” and to focus on things that come without the steep social cost of pushing sometimes unpopular, but the correct choices. As I said in my opening remarks for this term’s events – if not you then who? You all have enjoyed the privilege of being a student at such a fantastic college, with such great tutors and staff who were singularly aimed at maximising your potential, you have done so well.

Now is the time for you to live up to your moral obligations to society and convert that potential energy to motion, and break through the barriers keeping us from the fair world we deserve. Appreciate that the path to true harmony is through equanimity in disagreements – your ability to think rationally and objectively in conflicts and

disagreement, will help you decide when you must convince others and when you must yield. The moment you develop a disdain for conflict and disagreements is when you'll start a self-fulfilling cycle that'll promote extreme ideologies – instead, embrace differences and tackle them head on. The moment you're comfortable being uncomfortable, is when you'll start taking the first steps to the high office you'd all be interviewing for one day. True merit necessitates patience to listen to those we most vehemently disagree with. I pray that you'll be the new age activist like Christopher James – a relatively unknown finance professional who refused to sell shares of Exxon on environmental grounds, rejected podium seeking fiery tactics of most activists, but instead muscled his way into the management of the company and forced them to change from the inside. He kept sitting at the negotiating table when it was the toughest, resisting all kinds of pressure, but in the end delivered what those protesting against him could never achieve. Like him, I know you will make us all proud by not seeking the limelight, but the hardest problems society has to offer – you are part of humanity's special forces, who have trained for it. Congratulations in advance for all that I know you'll achieve. Thank you once again for all your contributions throughout your time here.

I shall now pass it over to our college choir, for the first performance of the celebratory event that is the Leavers' Service.