

April 22, 2011
Convocation Talk

Perspectives from *Paradise Lost* for a Good Friday Graduation

Brothers and Sisters, I'm honored to be invited to speak to you this morning. I realize, however, that you have not come here to listen to me. You have come either to receive a degree or to watch someone you love receive a degree. Commencement speakers occupy an unenviable place in graduation exercises. Senator Bob Dole once quipped: "Being a commencement speaker is like being a corpse at a funeral. They need you in order to hold the event, but nobody expects you to say very much."

Today is an unusual graduation. It falls on Good Friday, the day the Christian world commemorates Christ's crucifixion and death prior to Easter Sunday. BYU graduation rarely falls on Good Friday. To my knowledge, this is only the second time in its history that BYU has held graduation on the Friday before Easter. It won't happen again for over 25 years, and then not again for more than 50 years thereafter. In light of this rare coincidence of the Christian and the academic calendar, I have sought for a topic suited to the occasion—one that dealt with education but also with Christ's Atonement. It turns out that this is precisely the focus of the final books of John Milton's Paradise Lost. So today I want to offer "Perspectives from Paradise Lost for a Good Friday Graduation." I hope that my brief remarks will help you as you, like Adam and Eve, leave this little paradise we call BYU on your journey into through the larger world homeward and heavenward.

As most of you know, Paradise Lost recounts the story of the Fall. It is the greatest epic poem in the English language. The ending of the poem is particularly sublime. It depicts the education of Adam and Eve in the Atonement as they prepare to leave Eden. They become, in effect, Christians. I find the epic's ending rich with resonance for this occasion, for it describes a moment much like this. The protagonists (Adam and Eve) are poised between the ending of one phase of their lives and the beginning of another. They are about to leave the garden, where they have known great happiness and learned many important lessons, and enter an alien world. Those around them instruct them, one last time, in the principles and priorities that they will need in the next stage of their journey. Does this sound familiar?

As Adam and Eve prepare to leave Eden, they are educated by an arch-angel. He articulates priorities for their intellectual, spiritual, and moral education similar to those articulated in BYU's Aims of an Education. The angel affirms the value of the intellectual enlargement. Milton's Adam and Eve are curious, inquisitive, intellectual beings—like you, I hope. They ask lots of questions in Eden and learn a great deal about the heavens and the earth, about nature and human nature, and ultimately about the future history of the world. Their intellectual growth has been a good thing; it has increased their capacity and made them more self knowing. Many see the story of the Fall as cautionary tale against knowledge, inquiry, curiosity. Not Milton. Milton's Eden is brimming with knowledge, questions, and even speculation. His Adam and Eve are learners. Yes, they are warned that their appetite for learning can get them in trouble, just as their appetite for eating. But they are not condemned for asking questions, only for disobedience. Milton believed that questioning and opinions in good people is but "knowledge in the making" (*Areopagitica*).

Similarly, Latter-day Saints believe that to be learned is good so long as one hearkens to the counsels of God. Knowing makes us more like God, whose glory is intelligence. God wants us to love him with our minds. I hope that you have experienced the joy of learning at BYU, that you've acquired an appetite for

learning here, and that you will continue to relish the sweet taste of learning throughout your lives. To feel one's mind expand is one of life's sweetest pleasures.

The Angel will soon teach Adam and Eve that even more important than intellectual knowledge of the heavens or earth is knowledge of spiritual truth—especially, the testimony of Jesus Christ and his Atonement. But let me share first Adam's response to learning that a Savior will come and atone for his sin in such a way as to enable his posterity to repent and return to God. He cannot contain his joy. He breaks forth:

QUOTE

O goodness infinite, goodness immense!
That all this good of evil shall produce,
And evil turn to good; . . .
 . . . full of doubt I stand,
Whether I should repent me now of sin
By me done and occasioned, or rejoice
Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring,
To God more glory, more good will to Men
From God, and over wrath grace shall abound.

I hope that among all else you've learned at BYU, you've been filled with spiritual knowledge of God's goodness.

[FOR FINE ARTS] Since you students are graduating in the College of Fine Arts, let me share an illustration by William Blake of this moment in the poem. As it focuses on the Cross, it is a fitting illustration for Good Friday. In this picture, the Arch-Angel points Adam's gaze to the Cross and Adam claps his hands in joy. At the bottom of the picture, Eve lies asleep, learning in a dream the same lessons Adam is taught in a waking vision. The most power detail in Blake's illustration for me is his imagination of the bottom of the Cross. The nail that pierces Christ's feet also impales the Serpent's head. It also slays Sin and Death, who lie at either side of the Cross. I love the symbolism of this: the nail that pierced Christ feet impales the Serpent's head and vanquishes Sin and Death.

Following this vision of the Atonement, Adam tells the angel what he has learned. His moving speech contains sentiments apropos for each of you as you leave BYU.

QUOTE

Greatly instructed I shall hence depart.
Greatly in peace of thought, and have my fill
Of knowledge. . . .
Henceforth I learn, that to obey is best,
And love with fear the only God, to walk
As in his presence, ever to observe
His providence, and on him sole depend,
Merciful over all his works, with good
Still overcoming evil, and by small
Accomplishing great things, by things deem'd weak
Subverting worldly strong, and worldly wise
By simply meek; that suffering for Truth's sake

Is fortitude to highest victory,
And to the faithful Death the Gate of Life;
Taught this by his example whom I now
Acknowledge my Redeemer ever blest.

The last words on Adam's lips are his testimony of Christ, "my Redeemer ever blest." I hope that you, like Adam, depart BYU filled with knowledge and greatly in peace. That you will walk as in the presence of God, overcoming evil by small things, ready to suffer for truth's sake and face death confident that it is the gate of life, with the testimony of Christ on your tongue and in your heart.

The angel approves what Adam has learned. He calls his testimony of Christ "the sum of wisdom"—meaning the summit or pinnacle. It is even more important than being able to name all the stars, know all the secrets of nature, or have all the wealth and power of the world. But such wisdom is not enough. Then the angel counsels Adam to add good deeds and Christian virtues to his knowledge:

QUOTE

To whom thus also th' Angel last replied:
This having learnt, thou hast attained the sum
Of wisdom; hope no higher, though all the stars
Thou knew'st by name, and all th' ethereal Powers,
All secrets of the deep, all Natures works,
Or works of God in Heav'n, Air, Earth, or Sea,
And all the riches of this World enjoydst,
And all the rule, one Empire; only add
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add Faith,
Add virtue, Patience, Temperance, add Love,
By name to come call'd Charity, the soul
Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loath
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A Paradise within thee, happier far.

The Aims of a BYU Education likewise says it is not enough to know. After all, the devils know that Jesus is the Christ. We must live the gospel, and it must live in us. We must add deeds answerable to our knowledge. And not deeds borne of grudging conformity. Christ-like virtues must be written deep into the fleshy tablets of our hearts. Then we will carry Heaven in us, no matter how far from Heaven we roam, and we shall not be loath to leave our various Edens for we shall possess paradise within us. I can give you no better advice as you graduate than this.

Having given Adam and Eve this advice, the Angel takes them by the hand and leads (not drives) them out of Eden onto a great plain and leaves them there to make their way in the world. They look back on "Paradise, their late happy seat" with tender feelings. Then they turn their faces forward to take a new journey, as you do today. The final evocative lines of the poem read as follows:

QUOTE

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;
The World was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,

Through Eden took their solitary way.

Graduates on this Good Friday: The world lies all before you, too. You have large scope to select your various places of rest in the wide world. Your journey will certainly involve times when you walk with slow and wandering steps. But because of the Atonement, you can return to the path if you lose your way. Some of you are fortunate enough to make your way from here hand in hand. All of you have access to Providence as your guide.

May God guide your wandering steps from Eden. May you ever walk as in His presence and on him sole depend. May you continue to learn and add deeds that match your knowledge of the truth. And may Providence attend you on your journey home.