McGILL UNIVERSITY

BACCALAUREATE SERMON
SUNDAY, MAY 27, 1945

"YE MIGHT HAVE PEACE"

Delivered by
F. CYRIL JAMES, Principal and Vice-Chancellor,
to the members of the Graduating Class.

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"These things have I spoken unto you that, in me, ye might have peace." John, XVI, 33.

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THIS Baccalaureate Service is not, and should not be, the occasion for another lecture. Your formal lectures ended some weeks ago. Final examinations are behind you and, in a few days, you will receive the degrees that you have won. This is a quiet hour in which you have come together for a last word of counsel before you leave the University behind you and set out on a fresh stage in your journey.

But there is a special quality to this Baccalaureate Service that marks it off from those that have occurred during the past five years. The war in Europe is finished, and our hearts are filled with thanksgiving. In the churches of a dozen lands, men and women have gathered to worship God in their own way. The hungry are being fed, the naked clothed, and the black fear of things worse than death no longer sits upon the minds of millions of our fellows. To us, in Montreal, the victory in Europe means much, but I wish I could find the words to bring clearly before you the meaning of that victory to each individual in the crowds of people who walked quietly along the battered streets of London on Easter Day, happy in the knowledge that no rocket-bombs had fallen for three days. It is to these people, and to the men and women of such a country as stricken Holland, that we must turn if we would realize the full meaning of the respite from tragedy and terror that has been won by the armies of the United Nations.

McGill men were among those who, by their effort and sacrifice, have won this victory for us. We remember them today with deep pride and great humility. We remember them as they sat in these same seats such a short while ago, and I know that each one of us draws from their example the inspiration and the strength that enables us to tackle the difficult problems that lie ahead.

Each one of you realizes, I am certain, that military victory has not yet brought peace and happiness to the millions of men and women who inhabit the continent of Europe. You know that, during the period of post-war reconstruction, which is just beginning, we must find wise solutions to problems of national welfare and international organization. You are going out into the world, to take up your responsibilities, at a moment that may be regarded by some future historian as one of the great climacterics in the progress of mankind and, in order to find a last word of advice to help you in your tasks, I have chosen my text from that last conversation of Christ with his disciples.

There is sublime tragedy in that chapter. Christ had worked and taught for almost three years with his chosen band of disciples. In a few hours he was to be executed, as a traitor against the Roman government, because of the message that he had preached, but he realized that those who had been closest to him, those who had heard all of his teaching and seen all of his work, had not fully understood that message. He could foresee the trials and tribulations that lay ahead, not for himself but for the men and women whom he wanted to help. As he came up to Jerusalem on that last visit, he wept and cried out of a full heart, "If thou hadst known, at least, even thou, in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace!, but now they are hid from thine eyes." The penalties of ignorance and folly were terrible to contemplate and, in this last discussion, the teacher tries to explain the real meaning of his gospel. "These things have I said unto you that, in me, ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation."

Let me turn for a moment from the details of that discussion to consider the wider implications of time and space. The Mediterranean world was experiencing a time of troubles that has many points of similarity to the situation in which we find ourselves today. Palestine itself was an "occupied country" that had lost its independence when the Roman legions intervened in a civil war almost a century earlier. The people were not reconciled to their yoke, as frequent rebellions proved, and there is strong evidence of what we should now call an "underground movement" enlisting in its ranks those Jews who had not forgotten the traditions of personal freedom and national independence. They longed for a Messiah who would lead them to victory over the alien armies of the invader and re-establish the Kingdom of Israel as a sovereign power.

But the Jews were not alone in their Messianic hopes. Vergil, and many another Roman, had not long before expressed the pious hope that some leader might arise who would restore law and order throughout the world, and enable each family to cultivate its garden in security and tranquillity. The fabric of western society seemed to be crumbling. For more than a century, the Roman Empire had been ravaged by a series of civil wars. Marius had executed the conservative aristocrats in the name of democracy, and Sulla (in the next generation) had purged the country of democrats in order to re-establish the power of the Senate. Caesar had led his armies out of Gaul to defeat the conservative forces of Pompey and, on the morrow of his victory, the conservative Senators had murdered Caesar and begun another Civil War. Time after time, the best blood of Rome was poured out in savage fratricidal struggle, while the wives and families of the soldiers suffered proscription and starvation. Is it any wonder that those who were wise enough to rise above the heat of struggle, and look towards the future, should have longed for a Messiah who would bring wars to an end and restore the ancient order of peace and prosperity?

At long last, Rome seemed to have found such a man in the lad Octavian—known to history as Augustus, and worshipped

as a god during his lifetime by millions who looked upon him as the great provider of all good things. He had not looked promising when his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, had been murdered but, in a series of brilliant military campaigns, he had defeated every one of his adversaries and, for the first time in two hundred years, brought peace throughout the length and breadth of the vast Roman Empire. He did not stop at that point: he had a plan. Even to this day, historians argue as to whether Augustus was conservative or democratic, whether he was the last supporter of the Senate or the first imperial tyrant, but the argument has little meaning. The strength of Augustus was not in the field of philosophy but in that of organization: he was not a teacher but a doer. His plan envisaged the creation of an efficient bureaucracy that would operate the Roman Empire as one mighty household under a single management and, although he offered no philosophical solutions to the ancient controversies, his government brought such peace and prosperity that men were content to forget the old arguments.

This was no small achievement. We can easily understand why he should have been regarded as a god by millions of those to whom he had brought such great benefits and, even in the cold light of historical retrospect, we still recognize Augustus as one of the outstanding figures in the story of western civilization. The Jews wanted an Augustus to redeem them from servitude. They were willing to support such a man, to fight for him (as Peter showed during that dark hour in the Garden of Gethsemane), but it was essential that he should have a plan that offered the prospect of victory and economic welfare. What Augustus had done for Rome, the Messiah would do, and more also, for the people of Israel.

During the course of that discussion from which I have taken my text, and on many another occasion, Christ must have realized how hard it is to overcome the widespread human assumption that an outstanding political leader with the appropriate plan can solve all the problems of the world. Time and time again, those who recognized him as a great teacher, to whom many of

the people listened eagerly, tried to sound him out on the subject of his political ambitions and his plans. After all, his early life was just as promising as that of Octavian had been. He might well be the expected Messiah, carefully studying the people and seeking the proper moment for a political *coup d'état.* Each time, Christ explained carefully that political ambitions and economic plans are less important than the mental attitude and ideals of the men and women who made up the community.

Let me recall one or two of those occasions. When he was teaching in the Temple, the chief priests and scribes sent an emissary who asked, "Is it lawful for us to give tribute unto Caesar?" Surely that question was close enough to their political dreams to encourage Christ to reveal something of his own plans. But you remember his answer: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's." There is no simple plan, no suggestion of a leader who will think for the whole nation, but a plain challenge to every individual to make up his own mind on fundamental matters of right and wrong.

On another occasion a wealthy and important citizen, "a certain ruler" in the words of Holy Writ, came with even greater caution to ask, "Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" It was plainly a cautious offer of support to the new movement, and revealed the rich man's desire to be a sleeping partner in the ultimate execution of Christ's plan for the Jewish nation. But once again, the answer was unexpected. "Thou knowest the commandments." And when, assuming perhaps that this reply was merely hedging, the man insisted that he had kept all the commandments from his youth up, there came the final and crushing challenge. "Sell all that thou hast, and distribute to the poor." There is no party-chest from which you can buy salvation by a large subscription; there is no simple plan that you can advance by a gift of funds. You must take on your own shoulders the responsibility for your own decisions and, in the clear light of your own conscience, do those things that you know to be right.

Most direct, most significant, of all was that last occasion when Christ was on trial for his life, and Pilate asked him flatly, "Art thou a King?" You may think that a criminal trial is not the best time or place for a statement of philosophy but, if you study the record of such trials, you will find that the answers to such a question fall into one or other of two clear groups. The prisoner may insist that he has been falsely accused, that he never had any political ambitions at all; or he may brazen the matter out and insist that he had a magnificent plan which failed because of bad luck and the inadequacy of his followers. Christ did neither. On this dramatic occasion, he repeated once again the simple statement of a philosophy that transcended the discussion of political plans and armed rebellions. "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice."

Pilate seems to have regarded the statement as mere evasion, simply asking the prisoner, "What is truth?" (and we can imagine the shrug of his shoulders) as he went out of the courtroom to suggest to the Jews that this ineffective preacher could not really be dangerous. But the Jews did not agree. They were savage with disappointment. They wanted an Augustus—a Messiah who would come with military talents and make of Palestine a great political power. Christ was not the person. Crucify him. Get rid of him. He was a failure.

If there had been newspaper correspondents in those days, I think that would have been their analysis of the events of that trial. What chance had Christ in the minds of men who were envious of the splendour of Augustus, and deeply impressed by the power of Tiberius who sat on the throne that his father had created? But, as we look backwards across the centuries, we see that the Roman Empire of Augustus disintegrated gradually into the dark night of the Middle Ages, and we see too that during those Dark Ages it was the Christian Church that tended the flickering lights of human knowledge and human decency. Indeed I would suggest to you that every forward step in the

long march of human progress has occurred when men understood, and practised in some measure, the message that Christ tried to teach during the years of his ministry, the message that he explained again to his disciples during the discussion from which I have taken my text.

It is not a unique message. Other great religious teachers have expressed it in similar words, and unnumbered philosophers have reiterated it. But it is a message of tremendous importance at this turning point in the history of western civilization. Once again we are in danger of assuming that carefully formulated plans can solve our problems and, in spite of our tragic experience with Nazi-ism and Fascism, there are still many who think that another great leader, with a different philosophy would be able to bring peace and prosperity to the world.

Such an attitude of mind is as dangerous today as it was two thousand years ago. Certainly we need plans, and it is important that these plans should be wisely formulated by men who are familiar with all the details of the complicated problems that confront us. But international peace and domestic reconstruction will not be attained by plans. Our success in the tasks that we are undertaking depends on our attitude of mind. The plans must be formulated in a spirit of Christian idealism: they must be understood and supported enthusiastically by millions of men and women throughout the world who have understood the lessons that Christ tried to teach.

You are going out into the world at one of the critical periods of history. Every one of you has an important part to play, whether you attain high office or live out your days as simple citizens of a small community. Every one of you must play that part, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, if we are to attain the ideals of which we dream. Every one of you can help to mould that amorphous, but powerful, force of public opinion which is the only force that we can rely on in the long run. I do not promise you that it will be an easy task. I do not promise that there will ever come a time

at which you can sit back and say that your work is finished. But I do suggest to you that you can find deep and abiding happiness if you accept and apply to your own lives the message that Christ taught. "These things have I spoken unto you that, in me, ye might have peace"—peace in your own hearts, and peace throughout the world.

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