October 31 2015

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Members of the University Council and community, very specially the Graduating Class of 2015, distinguished ladies and gentlemen all, on behalf of my fellow Honorary Graduate, I express my warm and sincere thanks to the University of the West Indies for the very high honour you have conferred on us.....as well as the special privilege of addressing this convocation.

The first word is a word of sincere congratulations to all the graduands whose advancement we celebrate today and who are the real reason for the rest of us being here. I shall not abuse your kindness by detaining you for an unduly long time. I take my cue from the distinguished Poet Laureate of Jamaica and one day old Honorary Graduate Honourable Mervyn Morris, who in an earlier life gave me a now much used icebreaker...the story of the new employee who, when charged by his boss for being late for work every morning, confidently responded by pointing out that he made up for his late arrival by leaving early every afternoon. (I assure you that Mervyn's story was not autobiographical.)

This campus and this occasion together remind me of a statement I made several decades ago when on the basis of four years at Mona, I declared that my university years were indeed the best years of my life. I repeat it now not only out of gratitude, but because I hope that this graduating class, despite the challenges and cost of higher education will come to appreciate that their time spent here has prepared them in a very special way for the life they have ahead of them.

The regional character of the institution although not as fully experienced by students as in an earlier time should constantly remind us all of the value of belonging to the Caribbean and the strengths which this Caribbean civilization can give us - operating and competing as we must in a globalized intellectual, social, trade and business environment.. And without trying to resurrect a federation debate, I certainly would encourage all of us to recognize the opportunities and benefits of more strategic cooperation as Caribbean territories and Caribbean nationals. I will say nothing about the Caribbean Court of Justice but I will assert that island pride and patriotism are not in conflict with intelligent and sustainable integration, and I would encourage you to find ways of making our region add value to our national development efforts.
My next appeal to you ....and especially to this particular set of graduates....is to promote, both within the sphere of your professional focus and in your own close circle and family the notion that Jamaica needs to invest more heavily in tertiary level education, within which our universities must play a leading role. Gone are the days when we regard college and university education as the preserve of a privileged minority...be it 20% or 30% of the identified cohort, or any other similar measure. The fact is that nations and societies which have not maximized and optimized the access to and quality of higher education are doomed to remain in the backwaters of both social and economic development.

I do not make this appeal - which I know is not new - as yet another demand on the governments - and the Jamaican government in particular with its limited financial resources. On the contrary, I urge you to be advocates for a broadening and strengthening of strategic partnerships between parents and family members, the private sector in its widest sense, foundations, international funding bodies, diaspora communities and the universities themselves - including their alumni - aimed at changing both an understanding of the higher education development imperatives and our collective capacity for financing access, enhancing quality and improving relevance. It is not beyond us to reduce the level of unemployed graduates and to increase the level of graduate fitness for purpose in the current and foreseeable market environment. Who better than you and your peers elsewhere to bring your expertise and your vision to bear on this process of reshaping policy, changing horizons and impacting outcomes?

Allow me two other brief observations. One - perhaps too obvious to address at length to this distinguished graduating class - is our need to build not only or not so much of a knowledge society but a learning society. Knowledge is constantly changing and being shared and this is both necessary and desirable. But the appetite to seek and make full use of the knowledge, information, know-how, skills generated must be nurtured within individuals throughout life.

In addition, when we adopt the attitude of being constant learners, the likelihood of holding to hardened positions, consolidating prejudice, and displaying bigotry, and intolerance is reduced, and there is an openness not only to new ways of doing things or to new ideas but to changes in attitude to others and greater understanding of human complexity and human possibilities. In that connection, I
commend to you ideas contained in a publication created with the guidance of the distinguished economist and philosopher (Thomas W Lamont) Harvard ProfessorAmartya Sen, and inputs from a former Vice Chancellor of this University, the late Professor Ralston 'Rex' Nettleford. It is entitled a Commonwealth publication, 'Civil Paths to Peace' and it highlights the value of the multiple identities which each of us possesses - a gift which is of value both to success in management and the preservation of social stability.

This next and final observation is connected to the last. Your primary focus will now be on securing your financial future, as you advance your progress in your place of engagement or find a new professional position. But let me urge you never to lose sight of your role as an active participant or investment leader in the building of social capital - giving public or community service to this country whether you choose to reside here or not. Being multi-focused, multi-directional as you set goals and develop your operational plan is important for national development and can also be very satisfying to you as an individual. I sense that you want to be prosperous and proud citizens of your country wherever you are.

My fellow honorary graduate at this morning's ceremony is one of the best examples I know of that approach. Sir Godfrey Palmer aka Geoff Palmer, as you have heard, has a distinguished record of scholarly achievements and public service. Having met him and seen his impact at close quarters, I ask your leave to highlight an aspect or two of his approach which impressed me...

His attitude in no way reflected the ivory tower detachment which some scholars have substantially embraced. He could have settled for the more comfortable life of a respected academic and member of the Scottish establishment, including the magnates of the whisky producing sector who owed much to him. Instead, he chose to challenge the views which they held and stubbornly sought to promote in relation to the slave trade (a subject on which our VC is more than knowledgeable). It was Geoff who brought home to that establishment the extent to which Scotland owed its wealth to exploitation of African forced labour and Caribbean raw materials over an extended period leading up to 1807 and therefore could not pretend to be disconnected from the history.
At another level, he relished communicating with and inspiring our diaspora community regardless of social class or sectoral interest. And an interesting "side note" ...Scottish tourists to African countries or Europe if they had been properly briefed ahead of travel knew that if they had a problem, they had no need to find a British consulate. Instead, they would do better to find the local brewery, because the experts and the managers were almost certain to have been graduates of Heriot Watt University in Scotland and to have known the influential high ranking chemist Geoff Palmer. (So much for Medecins sans Frontieres ...we also have Brewers across Borders)....Let us also have BBAs, MBAs and DBAs with a national perspective and a national mission.

I take the liberty on Sir Godfrey's behalf and as a grateful beneficiary of the University of the West Indies to say thanks to the community and to wish for the graduating class, the University and all of us a future of promise, greater productivity and prosperity and the successful building of a Jamaica and a Caribbean which will continue to impress the world - not by shock and awe but by our genius, our creativity and our pride.

I thank you.