The Very Rev John Mann, speaking at the Ulster University Post-graduation Dinner in Belfast Cathedral on July 4 2018.

Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Members of Council and Senate, Graduates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It was with considerable surprise and immense pleasure that I received the information some weeks ago that I had been awarded an honorary degree from Ulster University. Having been a neighbour of the Belfast campus during my years at St Anne's Cathedral, and knowing of the encouragement and involvement of the University in the life of this City, the Cathedral Quarter and, indeed, the whole of this beautiful and vibrant part of this very special country, I was even more touched by this honour.

But, I stand and address those whose lives have been focused on this day and their graduation for years, rather than weeks, and at the end of a period of intense work and creative study. It goes without saying that such a degree, as is marked by this ceremony this evening, comes as the end crowns the work. But what now? There will be celebrations, I hope; joy, and a sense of release and relief, without doubt, but, like crossing any finishing line, one is never quite the same again.

Graduation might be thought of as a catapult that friends, tutors and family have helped you to wind up to this day of release, but only you can direct it. It is your life; your choice; your opportunity. Some of you will know exactly where you are going from here, others will be looking in the hope of finding the way forward, still others may have nothing on the horizon and are undecided.

Let us examine the bigger picture for a moment. The past two years, and more, have seen significant and on-going change in the moral, humanitarian and political landscape, both locally and internationally. You are graduating into a world that has been, at least partially, stabilised by an alliance of western democracies since the end of the Second World War. Now the world order is changing, and we are all responsible individuals who will play our part in determining what happens, whether it is at our street corner, or around the directional point of community or national life, or within the corridors of power. Many of you will find yourselves relating to others in some kind of influential position; that may be directly through teaching, or more tangentially via social media, or artistic expression, or something creative in visual or spoken communication, or through business or cultural acumen, or, by involvement in one of the caring professions.

Ulster University is an institution that is intrinsically at one with the way that people live and conduct themselves in community. As the future unfolds before you, with its challenges and its opportunities, please take time to learn from the past, but do not live in it. All of us make mistakes; do not be fearful of that; better to try and not succeed than not to try at all. So be courageous and determined, play your part as those who will shape not only your own future, but that of others too; open your hearts to diversity; seek to live with those whose opinions you do not share. 'Respect' is just a beginning, but it is too cold a word for true community cohesion; to build relationships that will last we seek to fulfil each other's dreams and perhaps that may mean seeking change within ourselves and an ever growing capacity to listen and reflect and learn. These skills that you have proven by the degree that you have now received - please use these skills in the years that lie ahead - go, be blessed in all you do, remember where you are from; step forward boldly and embrace the opportunities before you.