

**Life after Ampleforth.**

Good evening, Headmaster, students, staff and honoured guests. In the next 12 minutes, I will offer you some reflections on what it might mean to leave compulsory education and venture out beyond the valley. This is not quite as simple as it sounds. In fact, it's not simple at all, because, as you get older, memories become harder to separate from myth, and the myth becomes the thing you share with others.

As I look back, it is now clear that my sixth-form days coincided with some important world events. Tony Blair had been elected Prime Minister in the first year of my A level Politics course; English Poet Laureate, Ted Hughes, had died before I had sat my final English Literature exams; and a series of floods, blizzards and tornadoes in America meant that our Geography case-studies were being rewritten even as we were learning them. Princess Diana had been killed in a car crash. Britain was locked in a bitter dispute about the future of the monarchy. And a peace agreement had been reached in Northern Ireland, much to the relief of my friends hoping to serve in the British Army. I think it is fair to say, that there was a lot 'going on' during these short 22 months.

But actually, the reason I struggle to remember leaving school at 18, is probably because I didn't sit my A levels at school, and certainly not at a school like this one. I took them at one of the biggest sixth form colleges in the country, alongside more than 10,000 other students. I couldn't get my House shirt signed on the last day, because we had no houses. I can't remember the pep talk that our Head of Year or housemaster gave us before we left, because these people didn't exist. And I can't recall the exact moment we were liberated from lessons, because we were only in for a few hours a day anyway. We certainly had no formal Leavers' Ball, Dance or Supper.

So, as you sit here this evening, I can remember what parting company with my classmates and teachers felt like and I can remember the wait for that results envelope to land on the doormat. But I cannot begin to understand what it must feel like to leave a place where you have lived, prayed, worked, studied, exercised and socialised for about 10 months a year for 2 years, 3 years, 5 years or more; to understand what that last House Punch felt like as you honoured the life of your patron saint with your assembled tribe for the final time; to

understand what it is to be a former boarding school student on the threshold of independent adult life.

So, let's spend some time looking back at your last 20 months to see if that helps me make sense of it. In Year 12, under Mr Hudson's wise direction, you applied yourselves to your studies at a time when the truth has never been so threatened by present-day deceivers, dictators and demagogues. In November 2023, the UK government chaired a summit with the aim of tackling AI threats to our thought, our creativity and our way of life. By March 2024, the EU and UK had passed the Artificial Intelligence Act as a first attempt to ensure that you could reach adulthood as something more than a packet of assorted personal data. Elsewhere, the ongoing war in Ukraine and renewed violence in the Middle East and the Red Sea continued to make holidays more worrying and dangerous than any of us would have wished; but amid all this, you continued to prepare well for your end of year exams and secured some creditable results.

In Year 13, you returned from a summer holiday punctuated by an assassination attempt on a US presidential candidate, General Elections in the UK and India, and unsettling news of a worldwide rise in Monkeypox cases to your first Headmaster's Lectures, which featured presentations on the perils of war photography; teaching creative writing in prisons; and the testimony of one of the last living Holocaust survivors. You then sat your first round of formal mock exams.

In the same month that Mr Hall was sending off your UCAS applications, an American data company was launching a new update to its ChatGPT AI engine, called o1, which demonstrated an ability to match the results of PhD students on physics, biology and chemistry tests. A few days later, the entirely AI-generated YouTube starlet Anna Indiana released the music video of her latest AI-composed country-pop ballad, 'Save me a Dance,' to considerably less public attention than her debut release had received, then described by one AI sceptic as 'One of the most horrifying things I've witnessed since Halloween ended.' I'm not sure how well Anna Indiana would have done in her physics mock, but I'm pretty certain she'd struggle to hold down a place in the Schola, who took some proper music on a tour of Paris this academic year. The autumn term drew to a close with your last assembly from Mr Roberts, and the spectacle of his being applauded towards a well-deserved retirement. The term was rounded off with your final Carol Service as Amplefordians and Father Henry

sending you back to your families for a busy Christmas period of revision and celebration. This year has contained a number of notable 'last things', hasn't it?

In January, you found a new headmaster addressing you in assembly, as Mr Mutton eloquently set out his aspirations for you as Pilgrims of Hope at the beginning of the 2025 Jubilee, challenging you to begin your final year with a commitment to optimism, determination and discovery in your studies, prayer and relationships. Within days, Heads of Department, your Head of Year, your houseparents, your tutor and your subject teachers were emphasising the need to manage your time carefully and to focus on **doing** good as much as **being** good; and much good was done by your year group, whether in the form of the sponsored sleep-out, the SHAC Rock fundraiser, or simply modelling what well-directed academic ambition looks like in a British boarding school.

After the February mocks, the Year 13 Retreat came as a brief, contemplative pause from the busyness—an opportunity for everyone to demonstrate that you are all loved as much for who you are becoming as for who you are now. When the Easter break finally arrived, it brought revision plans, the finishing touches to BTEC and A level NEA projects, and 20 hours of revision a week. More significantly, Easter Monday marked the end of the pontificate of Pope Francis and the beginning of his final pilgrimage to the Upper Room. Many of you joined with millions around the world to witness the funeral of a priest whose last public words were, fittingly, 'Happy Easter!'

Yet there is always something beyond 'last things', and the newly-elected Pope Leo, in his first public address, challenged his listeners 'to seek together how to be a missionary Church, [...] always open to receive [...] all who need our charity, our presence, dialogue and love.' We will wait and see just how quickly the world is ready to put aside its discord, distrust and despair and act upon these words.

But now we return to you, you who have witnessed so many last things and so many first things in these short five-and-a-half terms; you who are approaching your last days here and whose first days are perhaps already taking on those mythic qualities of moments remembered. What's it all been for? Who, to revisit the theme of the Year group retreat, do you say you are?

Well, we would like to think of you as people who know that the community of faith is alive and growing in what we are frequently told is a godless age; who have grown smarter in understanding that technological innovation brings with it new responsibilities; who have begun to understand what independence of spirit actually means in its purest sense: conscious, purposeful self-possession. In short: people who are ready to leave us.

I said at the beginning of this speech that I almost certainly cannot understand what it must feel like to be on the eve of leaving a full boarding school education, and what closing words of wisdom I should pass on to you all to carry with you from this place. So, I asked some Old Amplefordians who probably have a better idea than me of how you might meet the future. And they said this:

On embracing opportunity, Philippa says: 'Don't worry if you don't find the perfect career straight away—every experience teaches you something and the right path often emerges as you try different things.'

On faith, Piers says: 'Having returned to faith in middle age, I see this tradition as unique, beautiful and ever more important in today's society. Carry this precious gift with you and nurture it.'

On charity, Richard says: 'If you look on love as a commandment, you will not go wrong.'

On community, George says: 'The sense of community at school is essential in your first year away from it, as you understand how to integrate with new people. Post-College life shouldn't be a worry for any of you.'

This wisdom is offered to you by those who have gone before you and are now active members of the Ampleforth Society. These are not just warm words—they are accurate reports back from the road you are about to travel—a road that does not end here and simply disappear.

Finally, for my part, I would like you to remember this: there are people who wish to see the end of places like Ampleforth; who believe that your education is indefensible because it is not experienced by all; who claim that faith schools cultivate division and not unity; who argue that the influence of the privately-educated is too great to be justified. I, for one, do not believe this, for my experience of teaching and tutoring some of you and serving as your Head

of Year tells me that the real shame is not that there are too many schools like Ampleforth, but too few. From this day forward, you must be the most compelling evidence of this truth.

Mr Hudson and I thank you for your patience, good humour and application over the past two years. We wish you all well in whatever calling awaits you. Perhaps, ladies and gentlemen, you might join me in a toast to the Y13 Leavers:

‘To Year 13 and to the future.’

Dr C. G. Vowles

Head of Upper Sixth

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