The class of 2001!
If you count the centuries correctly, you’re the first graduating class of the new millenium.
I remember when I first pondered this far-off date, thinking what it would be like to live in the new millenium. It was 1969.

I was entering high school—a cool freshmen in the Deerfield High School marching band—the marching warriors.

That year the centrepiece of our halftime show was the theme from “2001: A Space Odyssey,” one of the hit movies of 1968.

You know the music—(you can play it in your head)—the fanfare opens with 3 majestic sustained notes building to a crescendo, carrying you to some far away place; Then suddenly—the abrupt intrusion of 2 staccato notes, fully orchestrated, evoking a sense of something grand bursting into awareness.

It happens again. And then a third time—the three sustained notes taking you farther with each repetition; And then, the two staccato notes again, but higher this time; sustained longer;
Followed by a frantic, foreboding timpani beat—something uncomfortably sinister emerging from just below the surface.

Then the music opens into new space, climbing up and up and up, Like the tower of babel—but now elements of the orchestra have broken off into parallel descending lines.

The music utterly captivated our imaginations—

It was perfect for prompting imaginings about what 2001 would be like—it was 32 years away—a new millenium!

We envisioned a world something like the one inhabited by the jetsons with flying cars and push button conveniences—

Or, would 2001 be more sinister (the timpani beat; the descending line)… Bringing us something like Hal in the movie—computer intelligence gone awry, taking over the ship; taking over the world?

In 1969 our imaginations went to preposterous lengths—the whole world controlled by computers…

But in 1969, the big dream for us, growing up in Chicago wasn’t space travel or the emergence of super computers or super-humanity. It was the Chicago Cubs. The Cubs were in first place, and 1969 was going to be our year! [pause]

Alas (those of you who follow such things know) it was not to be.
That fall, I learned a lot about life.
(as I’ve told some of you before) the fact that I am a lifelong Cub fan may explain why I went into the field of religion. Being a Cub fan requires that one deal with questions of suffering and despair.
It nurtures the virtue of patience…

You see, life is, in fact, like a cub season:
*life has its bratwurst and ice cold drinks at wrigley field;
*there’s Ernie Banks in 1969 and Sammy Sosa in 1999.
*but there will always be the New York Mets—(they overtook the Cubs in the last week of the 69 season and went on to win the World Series, and have become, for Chicagoans, the symbol of cosmic evil).
*there will always be the end of the season in 5th place.
*but, for the Cub fan there will always be next year!
(which, by the way, is this year! The Cubs are currently in first place—12 in a row!)

[pause]

So what does all this have to do with commencement 2001?
I know that you, too, were thinking about Kubrick’s space odyssey movie (even if you didn’t know when it came out).
You may recall that your class motto back in 1997 was:
“our odyssey has just begun” (repeat)

Now here you are in 2001, your four years at Centre successfully completed. So it is fitting this morning to reflect on the passage of time—whether 4 years or 32 years—with some help from biblical writers.

You see, authors of biblical texts written in Greek, or those who translated the Hebrew texts into Greek, used two different Greek words for time: kairos and chronos.

Chronos is the word for the passage of time, duration, a quantity of time. (It’s the word from which we derive our English words chronic or chronology).

Really, this is what you’re celebrating today—a period of four years has passed and you’ve persisted, day in and day out.

Within this passage of time (chronos) the events of our lives, great and small, play themselves out.

Chronos time, of course, is characterized by change:

You entered here in Riegelman time and you leave in Roush time. You entered in Scrapper Willoughby time and you depart in Jed Doty time.

During your time here, Cowan was refurbished and Starbucks came to the bookstore. East Hall was torn down; the Jones Arts Center went up; and the bug crawled onto the lawn to bask in the light of the flame.
While you were here centre added a Latin America program; established a new sorority; and switched from coke to pepsi.

With sadness, you said farewell this year to the wonderful woman who filled your post office boxes with good things from home. Such are the moments of chronos time.

**It is within chronos time that memories are made:**

- trudging through the 2 feet of snow that disrupted your first winter term;
- evacuating campus to avoid breathing fumes from the flaming boxcar;
- finding an off-campus venue for phi-delt parties;
- and dodging the mad cow liberated from the stockyard—

The stockyard that so often fills your chronos time with the unmistakable aroma of the first steps in the process that yields your cowan hamburgers.

You defeated Trinity in football. You went to the NCAA tournament in soccer. You set a new school record for baseball victories in a single season. And you got to the sweet 16 in women’s basketball.

You made the dean’s list, earned Phi Beta Kappa honors, and won Fulbright and Goldwater scholarships.

And on the stages of this building you heard everything from poet laureate Robert Penske to Stomp; from House of Blues to historian Arthur Schlesinger; from Yo Yo Ma to Willie Nelson.

And of course, you watched your college make history as the vice-presidential debate took place right here in October.

**It is within the flow of chronos time that we create lives that have meaning and significance:**

In your four years, you taught kids to read, sang praises at CCF, debated the issue of sweatshops, donated blood, and built a Habitat house for a family in Danville.

*chronos time is ordinary time, but that doesn’t mean that it’s devoid of theological meaning. You see, god has been present in every one of the moments of your chronos time. And for that reason alone, it’s worth pausing this morning before you graduate to acknowledge god’s goodness, and to give thanks for the grace that sustained you through these years.*

Now, there’s another word for time used by the Greek writers of the New Testament and the translators of the Hebrew Testament. That word is kairos.

If chronos denotes *quantity* of time, kairos marks its quality.

Kairos time is momentous—it’s a period on which everything that follows hinges. Kairos is the word used in the Gospel of Mark when Jesus says, “the time (kairos) is fulfilled, and the kingdom of god is at hand.”
So, kairos time calls for discernment. Kairos is the word used in Matthew when Jesus faults his adversaries for their inability to “discern the signs of the times.”

Kairos is often a time of crisis that upsets the normal routine of our lives—and for exactly that reason, it’s a time of opportunity. It is a moment bursting with potential for something new.

Biblical images that illustrate the meaning of kairos include pregnancy and harvest. Kairos time is the moment when the fruit is ripe; the season when we reap what we have sown. (Galatians).

Kairos time is the period during which vision becomes reality and alters the grand sweep of history.

So, kairos time calls us to decision; it challenges us to seize the opportunity it presents to us. Kairos is the word used in the Greek translation of Esther—

The Jews were in a moment of crisis; threatened with annihilation—but providentially, the right person was in the right place at the right time. And Mordecai, who knew how to discern the signs of the times, called Esther to act:

“perhaps,” he said, “perhaps you have come to the kingdom
For such a time as this.”

So while we celebrate the passage of time today, and the achievements that have filled your chronos time, we are also called this morning to “discern the signs of the times” with the eyes of faith and the wisdom of our tradition. We are called to ask whether we have come to this place—

“For such a time as this.”

And this brings me back to 1969. It seemed like kairos time—a time of travail alive with new possibilities; an era that called people to decision on the compelling issues that so unbalanced their ordinary time. (civil rights, war and peace, women’s rights, ecology)

What has happened in the 32 years since the movie first prompted some of us to dream about life in the new millennium?

Let me highlight three moments, and note the implications for you who will live out your adult lives in the 21st century.

First

In 1969, we landed on the moon. Neil Armstrong called it “a giant leap for mankind.” And so it was. Wherever we were, we gathered around our televisions and watched with amazement—(it’s so routine now). We were seized with a sense of the incredible feats of which science is capable.

Kennedy’s bold dream focused the resources of science, government, and industry in an endeavor that culminated in an astonishing achievement.

The very next year was the first Earth Day—the dawning of a movement that asked the country to consider whether the achievements of science, technology, government and industry, and the
lifestyles they make possible, were threatening the very capacity of the earth and its atmosphere to sustain life.

That was over 30 years ago. Think of the new developments in science and technology just while you’ve been at centre.

*we’ve cloned a sheep, and a number of mavericks are experimenting with the possibility of cloning human beings.

*we’ve seen pictures of jupiter on our television screens.

*we now have a map of the human genome.

*with increasingly sophisticated computer technology we’ve steamedlined our economy, our transportation systems, and every other aspect of our lives;

*and we’ve connected every corner of the earth to systems that have revolutionized communication and the ability to retrieve information.

Naturally, every one of these remarkable achievements carries enormous potential for good.

But these realities raise the same questions raised by the movie 2001: space odyssey, and by its stirring fanfare.

The fanfare that accompanies each breakthrough in human achievement in the movie was composed by richard strauss, (a german criticized for being too cozy with the nazis late in his life), who said this about his composition:

“in zarathustra, i meant to convey by means of music, An idea of the development of the human race, from its origin, Through the various phases of its development, Up to nietzsche’s idea of the superman.”

So 2001 is here. And we must ask ourselves: is zarathustra the messenger of yet new levels of human achievement? —the herald of our continuing evolution into supermen; Supermen who transcend the fettering limits imposed by now outdated concepts of good and evil?

Or, is zarathustra an omen, reminding those who are equipped to discern the signs of the times, that ancient wisdom calls us to heed limits?

Our tradition affirms that human beings are enlivened by the very breath of god; the spark of the divine.

But we are also dust of the earth. And in this paradox is both our glory and our predicament.

Our capacity to create is nothing short of godlike.
But where is the line between our most glorious innovations and the tower of babel that might lead us downward into chaos?

Class of 2001, could it be that you have been brought here “for such a time as this?”

What will you do with the amazing accumulation of knowledge that is shaping your lives? How will you live in a time when we know so much, and are convicted of so little?

Your education has equipped you to contribute to the body of human knowledge in ways we can scarcely imagine today.

But your kairos moment calls you to ask, with t.s. Eliot, “where is the knowledge that is lost in information? Where is the wisdom that is lost in knowledge?”

One of the great gifts of your liberal arts education is that you have been encouraged to grow in both knowledge and wisdom—

This is your kairos moment—a moment that calls you to employ wisdom in the application of knowledge, for the service of the common good.

Leads to:
Second—
In 1969, president nixon called a white house conference on hunger, and opened the gathering with a dream as bold as jfk’s challenge to science earlier in the decade. Building upon johnson’s “war on poverty,” nixon challenged the conferees to end hunger and poverty in america.

The conference set the stage for the social policy of the next 27 years. (w.i.c program, food stamps, school breakfasts and school lunches…)

Clearly, some of our efforts at collective caring went wrong, contributing to what some have called a culture of dependency.

So, in 1996 we embarked on a new experiment. We ended the federal entitlement to welfare for a number of categories of our population—and in many cases, we alleviated poverty too, as people got training and went to work in a growing economy.

*but poverty in america persists as the festering wound on a body politic that is ostensibly so healthy and vigorous we think we can get by without paying attention to the problem.

I believe this fact highlights the meaning of our moment. The four years you’ve been at centre have been the best of times and the worst of times.

The gap between the rich and the poor in america is wider than at any time in our history. We’ve had an unprecedented 8, 9, 10 years of economic expansion, creating billionaires whose assets exceed the gdp of entire african nations, while an increasing percentage of our work force
consists of low-paid temp. Laborers, or single moms working jobs that don’t come close to paying a living wage that will support a family. Our soup kitchens and homeless shelters report record demand, and 40 million of our citizens postpone or forego health care for lack of insurance.

Class of 2001, could it be that you have been brought here “for such a time as this?” What will you do about poverty in this great nation?

As last year’s baccalaureate speaker said, “it doesn’t take an educated person to see suffering on the streets, but it may take educated people to do something about it.”

I would add that there is no issue of social ethics more consistently addressed by biblical writers than the issue of poverty—
From the gospel of luke, which portrays Jesus’ special concern for the poor;
To the 8th century prophets who insisted that economic justice was the mark of covenant faithfulness;
To the hebrew covenant that called the people of israel to heed the cry of the oppressed with acts of charity and with mechanisms for economic justice structured into the social fabric of the covenant community.

This is your kairos moment.

Third
A final point is related to the previous one.
1968 and 1969 were years saturated with the language of freedom and liberation.

In 1968, martin luther king was assassinated in memphis, and our cities exploded in riots, confronting us again with the ugly reality of racial injustice and discrimination.

Also in 1968, latin america’s catholic bishops met in medellin, colombia and endorsed themes of liberation theology that committed the church to stand with the poor and to work for justice in the midst of oppressive dictatorships.

I know from experience that this commitment was more than mere sloganeering. Two summers ago i stood in a rural community in guatemala where forensic anthropologists were digging up the bones of young children from a mass grave. Like priests and nuns throughout central america, these villagers were massacred for their stand against dictatorship. I listened to a young farmer named juan castro who told me of the disappearance of his brothers, whose bodies had been identified in that mass grave.

This class, perhaps more than any other, shares a collective knowledge of such realities.

Just this winter some of you toured the black townships of south africa and saw first-hand the legacy of stark systemic inequalities;
You lived in the homes of sweatshop workers and coffee pickers in nicaragua;
You watched devout muslims in a desperately poor turkish village heed the call to prayer;
You talked to village leaders in the central african republic;
And you worked in some of the toughest slums of Kingston, Jamaica.

Others of you have heard from Palestinians under siege on the West Bank. You’ve visited women in an Ecuadorian prison; encountered street people in London; And learned first-hand the plight of Algerian immigrants in France.

A few of you have knelt to comfort the poorest of the poor in Mother Theresa’s Calcutta. You’ve listened to forest-dwellers in Barbados and Costa Rica who are losing their habitat, And you’ve visited with Vietnamese villagers still bearing the scars of decades of war.

Shopping in a Moroccan casbah or riding a taxi in Havana, you’ve paid more than full price after having seen the conditions in which people live.

[And, you’ve stayed in homeless shelters in Louisville; taught English to Latino immigrants at local churches; and built houses in Appalachian counties where unemployment exceeds 20%].

This is a remarkable list!

It means that you know the truth about our world, and it means that you have a responsibility to act on what you know.

Flannery O’Connor, paraphrasing the Gospel of John says, “you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd.” It will make you odd because you know something others have not yet discovered and there’s no turning back.

Class of 2001, could it be that you have been brought here “for such a time as this?” What will you do about the persistent realities of inequality and oppression in this world?

This is your Kairos moment.

Eventually you will join professions that will give you opportunities to make a remarkable contribution to society.

But you also know that you dwell in a culture in the grip of a terribly destructive apathy; a pervasive resignation that sighs wearily at the persistence of seemingly intractable problems, but accepts the lie that there really isn’t anything we can do about them.

And so I close by returning to the words of the prophet Habakkuk:

Write the vision, 
Make it plain upon tablets, 
For still the vision awaits its time (its Kairos moment) 
If it seems slow wait for it; it will surely come. 
Behold, the one whose soul is not upright shall fail, 
But the righteous shall live by their faith.
What does it mean to live by faith? It means to cultivate a vision of what things ought to be like, and then to live that vision into reality.

T.e. Lawrence said it this way: “all people dream; but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds awake in the day to find that it was vanity. But the dreamers of the day are dangerous people, for they may act their dream with open eyes to make it possible.”

That’s what it means to live by faith.

Class of 2001, you have been brought here for such a time as this.

*how will you respond in an era when we know so much, but are convicted of so little?*

*what will you do about poverty in this great nation?*

*what will you do about the persistent realities of inequality and oppression in our world?*

Class of 2001, your odyssey has just begun.