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A Scholar Turned Politician

High Tribute to Dr. Z. K. Matthews

Introducing Zachariah Keodirelang Matthews, first graduate from the South African Native College and sometime Professor of African Studies, Vice-Principal and Acting Principal of the University College of Fort Hare, to the Chancellor for the conferment of an honorary Doctorate of Laws, the Public Orator described the candidate first as the embodiment of three facets of the life of Fort Hare. These, as in all universities, were Student, Scholar and Administrator. Professor Ewer also showed the inevitability attending the interest taken by the candidate in politics.

"The earliest universities," said Professor Ewer, "were free associations of students and scholars but, possibly because students too readily become a rabble, and scholars are only scholars, discipline and ego, administration, became necessary.

In those blissful days of the middle ages, administration grew slowly. The first known administrator of the University of Oxford, that cradle of Chancellors of the Exchequer, was the taxor, while the Scriba Universitatis, the forerunner of the Registrar, was a late arrival, found necessary only some 200 years after the establishment of the "studium generale".

Like the laws of physics, the laws of Parkinson have always been with us and so, once the first fatal step had been taken it was determined that a University should be a triple alliance of students, scholars and administrators.

EMBODIMENT

Zachariah Matthews is the embodiment of all these three facets of the life of the University College of Fort Hare, a student, a scholar and an administrator. He first came to the South African Native College in 1918 and, having matriculated, enrolled in the Faculty of Arts, distinguishing himself in his first year by winning the College Prize in Mathematics.

In 1923 he graduated, the first graduate from the College, and shortly after became headmaster of the Secondary School of Adams College in Natal. An administrator now, he still remained a student and a few years later became the first African to be awarded the Bachelor of Laws degree of the University of South Africa.

An educationist and a lawyer, but still a student. Where could the student find fresh knowledge and the background to relate that knowledge to Africa? The answer lay at Yale and in London where Zachariah Matthews studied under Malinkowsky before returning, now in the role of scholar, to Fort Hare to make a major contribution to African anthropology in his study of the Baralong of Basutoland, a contribution recognised by his appointment to the Chair of African Studies.

POLITICAL UNDERSTANDING

Protagoras tells us that in the days when the world was young, Zeus sent Hermes to distribute among men the virtues of justice and moderation that they might protect themselves from the attacks of wild beasts by political understanding.

So when we have in one man the sense of justice of the lawyer and the moderation of the scholar, it is inevitable that he should also be a politician.

But politician can be a word of abuse describing one who places office before honesty, power before principle, advancement before all. This path Zachariah Matthews has never followed, for he came to politics from scholarship.

Why should the scholar turn politician? Though in the past he may have lived a life remote from reality, today reality forces itself upon his attention: the humanist cannot neglect the cultural destructiveness of market values; the scientist cannot ignore the social consequences of the applications of physics and of medicine; so too the anthropologist cannot turn aside from the problems of relations between men of different races. The scholar must concern himself, if it be only to a limited degree, with the effect of his activities upon society, with the effect of society upon his activities.

HIGHEST HUMAN ENDEAVOUR

But there is a deeper reason why the scholar may concern himself with the actions of society. His task is the highest human endeavour, the search for truth. During his years as a student at Fort Hare, at Yale and in London, Zachariah Matthews had learnt that the discovery of what is true is not the prerogative of any one class or nation, but rather something to which all men may contribute and, equally important, something to which all men, regardless of race, colour or creed, should be free to contribute.

But this freedom to search for truth can be a hollow freedom if artificial barriers divide men one from another, if artificial social forms prevent the full development of the individual.

Thus the freedom to search for truth may imply the need for other wider freedoms. This is Zachariah Matthews' belief and it was this belief which led the scholar to become the politician.

He had grown up among men of deep faith who believed, not only in the brotherhood of man, but in its practical expression in social justice and in the duty to serve one's fellows. This sense of service led him to seek election from the Cape Rural Areas to the Native Representative Council. Here for many years he worked for his people, presently to resign when he felt that, with a clear conscience, he could continue no longer. So too, in later years he was to resign his Chair at the University College of Fort Hare rather than compromise his beliefs and the ideals of academic free-

dom—the right dispassionately to study any subject, the duty fearlessly to proclaim what one believes to be the truth, no matter how unpleasant or unwelcome that truth may be.

In the troubled world in which we live a new solution to man's problems has recently been discovered. This is called "uncommittedness" and widely paraded as a virtue, as if to have no beliefs, to take no action were the highest good. But a man lacking beliefs, afraid or unwilling to take action is no man; and it is as a man we respect Matthews; for his scholarship, his integrity and the courage with which he has sustained his beliefs. These virtues he learnt at the South African Native College and in honouring Zachariah Matthews we are honouring a foundation which strove to inculcate those virtues of which he is the embodiment.

Mr. Chancellor, I have the honour to present Zachariah Keodirelang Matthews, Master of Arts, Bachelor of Laws, for the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa, of this University.

Political Understanding