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**JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY
GRADUATION CEREMONY
TOWNSVILLE, QUEENSLAND
SATURDAY 29 MARCH 2003
ON LIFE'S JOURNEY**

The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG Hon D Litt (JCU)

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It is a wonderful privilege to receive a degree of this University in the company of its distinguished Faculty, of fellow graduates and of so many citizens who have come to share this special day with us, the graduates.

There is a famous film about the journey of a man to receive an honorary degree. The graduates in the Creative Arts will know of it and not a few of the graduates in Law and in Business. I refer to Ingmar Bergman's movie *Wild Strawberries*. It tells the story of the journey of an old man from Stockholm to the ancient Swedish university of Lund. It finishes in a ceremony like this one where the honorary doctor is called forward to receive his degree, just as I have been. On the journey to the ceremony, the graduate passes many familiar places that remind him of his life. Of the good and not so good things. Of the noble and less noble events. The whole

* Address on the occasion of the conferral of the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters.

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passage is a kind of metaphor for the journey we each make in life. It is a powerful evocation of the way our lives are made up of episodes with times of pain but also times of great joy such as we experience today.

My journey to this ceremony symbolises the change that has come over my profession, our country and the world since I received my first degree at the University of Sydney in 1959.

A week ago I was in New Delhi. Yesterday I was in Wellington, New Zealand. Today I am here you in Townsville, Australia. That makes an awful lot of travelling and not a few frequent flyer points in the last week.

I was in New Delhi for a meeting devoted to the legal and ethical issues of biotechnology and specifically of the Human Genome Project. Fifty years ago exactly, Watson and Crick identified the features of DNA and of the double helix. From their discovery has come a remarkable progeny of biotechnological developments. With these have come extremely puzzling dilemmas - of ethics and of law. The meeting in New Delhi explored the approach to such dilemmas taken by the religions and philosophies of India: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism and Islam.

Yesterday, in Wellington New Zealand, I was engaged in a meeting concerned with some of the legal and societal implications

of informatics - of the Internet and of cyberspace. We were studying whether it would be possible, in the age of computers and of terrorism after September 11, 2001, to preserve the elements of human privacy that we have taken for granted in the past. So we live in the time of science and technology. Every discipline is affected by their dynamic. They are the great engines of our age.

And now today I have joined the company of the graduates who came forward to get their degrees. I join twenty-five thousand graduates of James Cook University. And I do so proudly.

As I waited for this ceremony to begin, from my hotel window I saw another ceremony unfolding on the lawn in the autumn sunshine. It was a wedding. The golden light caught the bride as she entered. All the guests stood in the garden until the ceremony began. It was a symbol of the fact that, at critical events in our lives, ceremony is important to us. We dress up in fine clothes. We treat the event seriously. We surround ourselves with our family and loved ones. It is inescapable that events such as this constitute a precious moment. It will be engraved on our memory and caught in our photographs. I urge you to express thanks to your parents and family. On occasions such as this, tell them that you love them. Somehow that seems to be a difficult thing for many of us to do. Remember your teachers. Express your thanks to them. Think of those who taught you at the local primary school, without whom

you would not be here today. This is a precious moment which should be savoured to the full.

I am proud to receive this degree in the centenary year of the High Court of Australia. It is a hundred years since our nation's highest court was established. The timing reminds us, as the peaceful wedding scene does, of the multiple blessings we enjoy in Australia. We have elected parliaments. We have uncorrupted officials. We have a military that keeps out of politics. We have universities of world class. We have independent judges and a vigorous legal profession. All of these are great blessings.

We should not be complacent. The law has greatly changed but it is by no means perfect. When I took my first degree, the law was sometimes most unjust to Aboriginal Australians. It still is. It was sometimes unjust to women. It still is. It was sometimes unjust to gays and lesbians. It still is. It was sometimes unjust to Asian Australians and people of colour. It still is.

Graduates of this University will not be complacent. They will be committed to continuing the effort to build a society and a world of greater justice for all.

I presume to speak on behalf of all my fellow graduates in expressing thanks to the University for the privilege of our degrees. It is true that in my case I did not earn my degree by burning the

midnight oil or by consuming ten thousand cups of coffee. But we all share a common pride in this University. In the earlier ceremony today, in the Biological Sciences, I heard the reports on the research of a number of the new PhD graduates. The research was at the cutting edge of science and technology. Everything from the causes and treatment of skin cancer to diseases of cattle and to vaccines against biological agents that may be used in new weapons of mass destruction. Little wonder that James Cook University continues to attract very large research funds. A fine University is known by its research and teaching. Cutting edge research is universal. It reminds us of the global environment of universities today.

So I am proud to join the company of James Cook University and to do so in your presence. I know how transient these remarks are. As a past University Chancellor I have sat through countless ceremonies. It is hard to call to mind a single observation of the parade of occasional speakers. Yet one that I recall is apt to my feelings at this moment. A Professor of Divinity spoke in the soft brogue of my grandfather, who left Northern Ireland a century ago to seek a better life in Australia. At the end of his speech he said in words that resonate for this occasion and for us all.

"For what we have received, and what we will continue to receive, by the precious gift of education, may the Lord make us truly grateful".