

DESEGREGATION:
AN OPPORTUNITY AND A CHALLENGE

Dr. Benjamin E. Mays



SHAW UNIVERSITY

101st Founder's Day Convocation

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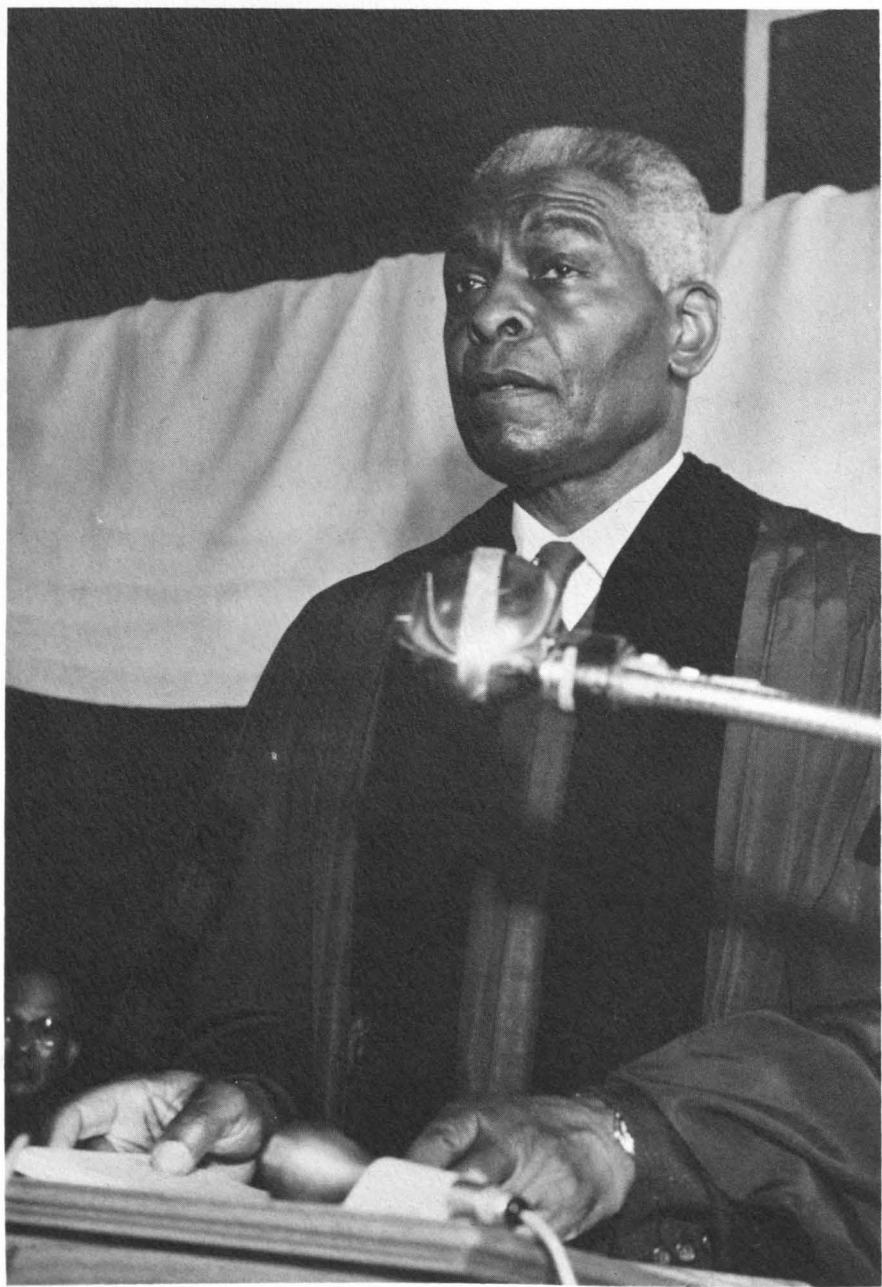
An Address By

Dr. Benjamin E. Mays

The 101st Founder's Day Convocation

Shaw University

Raleigh, North Carolina



SHAW UNIVERSITY has passed the century mark. One hundred years is a short time when compared with Oxford University founded in the 13th century and with Harvard University established in 1636. But when considered in the context of Negro freedom, Shaw is an ancient institution—much older than the University of Chicago. Your graduates have done much in these one hundred years. I can say of Shaw what I say of Morehouse! “Few institutions, if any, have done so much with so little and so few.” So I salute you and your President who have done so much for Shaw. Few men could have done what your President has done in so short a time. Shaw and the predominantly Negro colleges similarly situated have wrought mighty deeds in education, religion, business, and the professions. So much with so little and so few. Virtually all private Negro institutions started as Missionary Schools. And as Missionary Schools, they were expected to survive and thrive on less than white institutions. This philosophy has prevailed since the Civil War, and during the two-hundred forty-six years of slavery, that what is built for Negroes doesn't have to be as good as that which is built for white Americans. This accounts in part for the fact that under a segregated economy, virtually everything built for Negroes was inferior when compared with the things designed for whites. The segregated public schools for Negroes were decidedly inferior and deliberately planned to be inferior. All public facilities for Negroes were inferior and no places of any consequence were allowed him in local, state, and federal governments. These conditions existed until Negroes themselves rose up recently in rebellion through federal courts and demonstrations which led to congressional legislation abolishing segregation in most areas of American life. This belief that what was meant for Negroes didn't have to be first rate, permeated the thinking of many of the missionary teachers who taught in the early years at Shaw, Morehouse, Fisk, Howard, and other institutions.

Please do not misunderstand me. I thank God for the white teachers from the North and a few from the South who left comfort and social standing to cast their lot among the newly emancipated people. There was no doubt in many of their minds that they were called of God to educate the Negro. They were socially ostracized and looked down upon by Southern whites.

Whereas the vast majority of the people considered the Negro incapable of learning, these pioneers believed that given a chance, the sons and daughters of slaves could master the upper branches of knowledge. One illustration of this is the fact that many of our schools were called universities when they were nothing but grade schools. These teachers gave the Negro hope and without them, the Negro's plight would be more dreary than it is.

Despite meager support and the conviction that Negro schools needed less than white schools, Shaw and other predominantly Negro colleges have prepared Negroes for outstanding leadership. I am sure that 90% of all Negro college graduates graduated from predominantly Negro colleges like Shaw and Morehouse. Easily 90% or more of all Negro doctors, lawyers, and dentists took their undergraduate work at schools like Shaw. I would wager that 95% of all Negro teachers in our public schools and colleges came out of predominantly Negro colleges. The vast majority of Negroes in business and skilled trades are graduates of our colleges.

We are proud of outstanding Negroes who have graduated from predominantly Negro colleges: Proud of the Solicitor General of the United States who came from Lincoln and Howard, Senator-elect Brooke of Massachusetts who also graduated from Howard; proud of John Hope Franklin, Professor at the University of Chicago, who came out of Fisk; of Martin Luther King, Jr., Nobel Peace Prize Winner, and the two Nabrit brothers who came out of Morehouse; proud of our Negro judges, and Negroes who are teaching in eighty or more predominantly white colleges and universities. We are proud of James Cheek, Angie Brooks, and Benjamin Quarles of Shaw.

Of course, we are proud. But bear in mind that the vast majority of Negro families are living on three thousand dollars a year or less; that thirty-five million Americans are living on the brink of poverty, and too many of them are Negroes. This is the soil in which the seeds of revolution sprout. I wager that the rioters are poor and unemployed. We are proud of a desegregated society but lest we forget — along with desegregation goes a heavy responsibility, and the more we clamor for a desegregated society, and clamor we must, the more obligated we become to carry our full weight in the community, state and nation. All knowledgeable men know that coercion of some kind must be applied to uproot entrenched wrongs supported by law, custom, and religion. It is

clear as day that most of the social changes that have come about recently came through court and congressional action or some kind of demonstrations. The man who profits or thinks he profits by keeping another man down is not good enough to voluntarily stop exploiting him.

But as our young friends demonstrate and riot in Chicago, Cleveland, Brooklyn, Mississippi and other places, let us make it clear to them and to ourselves that there is no substitute for preparedness and professional competence. There is no dichotomy in the Civil Rights struggle. The young men and women who never sat-in and never demonstrated but stuck to their academic work were and are part and parcel of the Civil Rights struggle. For example, Hamilton Holmes did not go to jail in 1961-62 in Atlanta, he did not sit-in at restaurants, but he did sit-in and stand-in in the libraries and laboratories at the University of Georgia, graduating Phi Beta Kappa. This is a part of the Civil Rights struggle.

We had to demonstrate to get hotels, motels, and restaurants open, but tell it on the mountains and everywhere that this is only half of the story. Tell the people that Brooke, running for the United States Senate from Massachusetts, now Senator-elect, two Negro senators in the Georgia Legislature, Weaver, a member of the President's Cabinet, Sam Nabrit, a member of the Atomic Energy Commission, Donald Hopkins, a Morehouse graduate, graduating in the top third of his class at the University of Chicago Medical School, The Johnson Publishing Company in Chicago, the marvelous headquarters of the North Carolina Mutual in Durham, the Atlanta Life in Georgia, the work of outstanding Negro citizens in Raleigh, Martin Luther King, Jr., winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Thurgood Marshall, Solicitor General of the United States, Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, starring in baseball—all these and more are parts of the Civil Rights struggle. At the moment, the greatest contribution that Shaw students can make to the Civil Rights struggle is to do your work so well that when you finish jobs will be calling you and graduate and professional schools will be seeking you.

Desegregation and eventually integration will present a special challenge to Negroes and especially to Negro youths. Remember that no allowance will be made for our shortcomings because for two hundred forty-six years our ancestors were slaves and for

another one hundred years we were enslaved again through segregation by law and by custom. No allowance will be made for our poverty in that the average income of the Negro family is only about 55% of that of the average white family. When competence is needed in science, whether in Government, industry or education, no allowance will be made for the inferior schools Negroes have had to attend for decades upon decades. The only comment you will hear: "Negroes are not qualified. They failed the test." When a man of experience is needed to fill a certain post, no allowance will be made for the fact that the Negro has never been given a chance to get the kind of experience needed for that job. This is where hire on the basis of competence breaks down. He will be passed by and the only comment—"No Negro could be found with the proper qualifications."

Get it across to your sisters and brothers, tell it to your friends that they will never get into the main stream of American life by dropping out of school, by playing around, graduating at the foot of their class, by cursing America or the white man for two hundred forty-six years of slavery and one hundred years of segregation. He may be at fault, but cursing him will do no good.

Make it clear to ourselves and to Negro youth that with low incomes, poor academic backgrounds, unfortunate home conditions, handicapped ancestors for three and a half centuries—we are now required to compete in the open market with those who have been more favorably circumstanced than we for several centuries.

What can we do? There is only one thing we can do as new opportunities open to us. We can accept as valid the Chinese proverb: "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." The only thing left for a poor man to do to overcome his poverty is to find a good job, work hard and save. The only thing a sick man can do to gain health is to follow the doctor's advice and be sensible. The illiterate man who would overcome his ignorance must burn the midnight oil and study long and hard. All these things must be done as we protest and demonstrate for justice and equality.

Such is your plight and mine. For he who starts behind in the great race of life must forever remain behind or run faster than the man in front. The man who is handicapped by circumstances over which he had no control must work harder than the man who had no such handicaps to overcome. Deprived of the best schools,

reared in homes economically below standard, denied the opportunity to read good books in elementary and high school, robbed of the opportunities to qualify for the best jobs, our young people are, almost overnight, challenged to meet the toughest competition of the modern world. Protest? yes, and demonstrate when necessary. But remember, there is no substitute for excellence in performance.

Whether we like it or not, Negroes must read more and socialize less, study more and frolic less, think more and ape the white man less, do more research and play less, write books and articles and become recognized in our respective fields. It is better by far to be known by the articles we write than by the bridge we play; by the books we publish than by the house we live in. It is better to have our students rave about our great teaching than about our beautiful cars and clothes. It is better to have our colleagues envious of our scholarship and research than of our houses and land.

I am sure Marian Anderson is economically secure but Marian Anderson will be known not by her wealth but by her songs. John Fitzgerald Kennedy was a millionaire. But he got into history not by his millions but because he taught America that if things need to be changed we don't have to wait a hundred years to change them, we can change them now. Nobody cares how Socrates dressed, whether he wore shoes or walked barefooted. But the name of Socrates is immortal. Nobody cares how Mahatma Gandhi dressed or rode—half-naked or third class. History will claim him as one of the great men of all times.

Jesus was a despised Jew and a carpenter but He is known as the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. Nobody thinks of George Washington's wealth. He is the father of his country. Nobody worries about Lincoln's poverty, he is the great emancipator. Shakespeare is known by Hamlet and Macbeth, Milton by Paradise Lost, Darwin by the origin of the species, W. E. B. Dubois by the Souls of Black Folk, James Weldon Johnson by God's Trombones, and Booker T. Washington by Tuskegee.

My dear young friends, let us go into a desegregated society standing on our feet and not cringing, kowtowing, and crawling on our bellies. Let us not go into a desegregated society, even when we lick de facto segregation, and win the right to live anywhere we can buy, steeped in the inferiority complex. Let us not forget

that we are what we are. Let us not be swept off our feet by the glamour of an integrated society. By all means enjoy the swankiest hotels, eat in the finest restaurants, live on the boulevards, but let us never forsake that which we ourselves have built with sweat, blood, and tears. Let us not look down on banks, insurance companies, newspapers, churches, colleges, universities, real estate agencies, that Negro genius and brain have established. We can live in a desegregated society physically free but mentally slaves. Let us not become a race of employees only looking for a soft bed somebody else has made up. But let us also become a race of employers, blazing new paths and building new enterprises. As we look forward to invading everything others have built, let us have others invade our churches, our schools, our banks, and our insurance companies. Size alone is not the criterion of excellence.

As desegregation gives us larger and larger opportunities, let us not forget that these bring with them larger responsibilities. Negroes, under crippling conditions, have done exceedingly well but not well enough to pass. We have not been accepted into the main stream of American life. We have not yet made our case in politics, business and education. We are still looked upon as boys. The confidence we need in all these areas is not yet there. And yet the Negro's future in America is brighter than ever before. I dare not look to the future in despair. I look to the future with the courage and hope of Tennyson in Ulysses:

*Come my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars until I die.
It may be that the gulf will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

I challenge you to a life of dissatisfaction as set forth by Louis Untermeyer in his poem, "The Prayer."

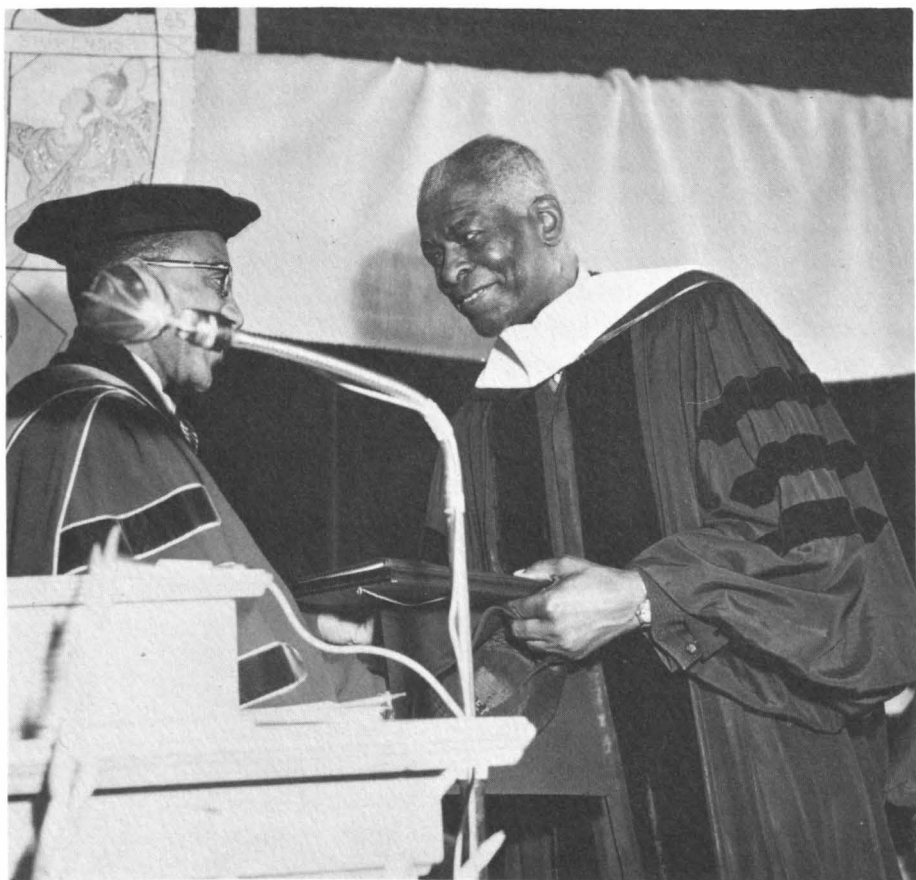
*God, though this life is but a wraith
Although we know not what we use,
Although we grope with little faith,
Give me the heart to fight and lose.*

*Ever insurgent let me be;
Make me more daring than devout;
From sleek contentment keep me free,
And fill me with a buoyant doubt.*

*Open my eyes to visions girt
With beauty and with wonder lit,
But let me always see the dirt
and all that spawn and die in it.*

*Open my ears to music; let
Me thrill with Spring's first flutes
and drums—
But never let me dare forget
The little ballads of the slums.*

*From compromise and things half done,
Keep me with stern and stubborn pride;
And when at last the battle is won,
God, keep me still unsatisfied.*





BENJAMIN ELIJAH MAYS

Doctor of Humane Letters

MR. PRESIDENT: In consent with Luther, "A Christian individual is perfectly free, Lord of all and subject to none—and yet—he is the perfectly dutiful servant of all and subject to all." Mr. President, in the Life, the Learning and Leadership of Benjamin Elijah Mays, Luther's faith is justified through works both good and great.

For, as a minister of the Word of God, of the Prophets, the Apostles and of the noblest of men, Jesus Christ, Benjamin Elijah Mays has inspired men to sustain their souls with Faith, to gird their spirits with Hope and to glorify their lives and works with the pre-eminent virtue of Paul's abiding Love.

For, as a writer on the subjects of education, religion, ethnology and the inalienable rights of Man, Benjamin Elijah Mays has handed his people the guiding Torch of Truth and afforded their oppressors, this nation and the world, with a written way to freedom, justice, peace and honor.

For, as an orator, speaking on the things dearest to the hearts of men: freedom, liberty, faith and life, equality and human dignity, Benjamin Elijah Mays has motivated men to think and moved them to act in reverence for their God and in respect for their fellow man.

For, as a presiding educator of Negro youth, who has at once specialized and objectified their proud and painful path to learning, Benjamin Elijah Mays has for so long distinguished the pursuit of knowledge, honored the acquisition of wisdom and acknowledged the pre-eminence of understanding.

And so, Mr. President, because he is a "Christian individual, perfectly free, Lord of all and subject to none—yet—the perfectly dutiful servant of all and subject to all," we are proud to present to you, Benjamin Elijah Mays, for the degree DOCTOR OF HUMANE LETTERS.