Thank you remarks for kind words and to the faculty and administrators of the University of Witwatersrand.

Congratulations to the graduates, your families, friends, teachers, and all who have supported you in your time here at Wits.

First, let me say how honored and humbled I am to be awarded an honorary doctorate from The University of Witwatersrand (my alma mater). It is a great pleasure for me to be back at Wits this week, the place where I began my lifelong study of mathematics. It is a great pleasure to meet and interact with your faculty and students!

I owe much of where I am today to Wits. I stepped onto this great campus in the early 70's, a naive 18 year-old. Thanks to my teachers and fellow students, the next four years opened my eyes to the world around me from the political to the scientific. Wits transformed me for good!

On the academic side, I had come here with the idea of studying Physics, but my performance in the lab left a lot to be desired. In high school, I had not realized that mathematics was a vibrant field with many fundamental and exciting problems impacting modern life and technology. I hadn’t realized that there was such a profession called "mathematician" (and, in fact, even today my father asks me why anyone would pay me to do this, to prove theorems!)

The exceptional faculty at Wits introduced me to modern mathematical sciences and I was immediately taken by abstract mathematics -- its beauty and the powerful reasoning which allows us to tackle many concrete problems whose solutions lie well below the surface. This quickly became my passion and it remains so to this day.

As a fourth year (honors) student at Wits I also had the opportunity to teach my first course, which if I recall correctly, was calculus for engineers. At the start of my first few classes I was greeted at the podium with a squadron of extraordinarily aerodynamic paper planes from the back of the class. However, after a few lectures things improved (single planes would arrive and only sporadically) and the foundations for my career as a teacher were formed at that time.
Not only do I owe to Wits what I learned in the classroom as an undergraduate and as an honors student, but also for the support and excellent advice of the faculty on how to pursue my dream of becoming a mathematician. Like everyone else, my trajectory after graduating was uncertain, but they assured that the initial conditions were very positive.

Today, you are graduating from this great institution and what you have learned from your fellow students and the faculty will serve you in whatever you decide to pursue. Be it further study, service, professional development – working on issues of local, national or global importance. Be ambitious in what you choose to do! There may be no better evidence that major problems do get solved, than South Africa becoming a democracy in 1994.

But as we all know, many problems remain and you will be the ones facing some of these, searching for solutions. If you have a passion to do something, don't shy away from it even if it looks like a long shot. Today is a day for you to dream of your future and what you can achieve for yourself and for others.

To be a little more concrete I draw from the world of academia and research, as this is where I have some experience. In some ways it is very different from the "real world" but in other ways it is quite similar. I am often asked by fresh Ph.D. graduates how to proceed with their research now that they are no longer students and on their own.

I reply that they should tackle a range of problems. In every field there are the big problems whose solution will instantly change the landscape. In Mathematics such a problem is the Riemann Hypothesis, concerning the zeroes of the Riemann-Zeta function – I will spare you the technical details! The chance of success on such a problem is small and the roadblocks overwhelming. Always keep these problems in mind, work around them, and expose yourself to being lucky, even to accidental discoveries.

But there are many smaller, more modest problems for which tracks have been laid, whose solutions give insight and may be the starting point for major advances. Don’t underestimate these problems! Solving them can give great satisfaction and confidence moving forward. And, many times it is these small problems that can yield major solutions in ways you never imagined. These are the ones that should occupy you most of the time. Keep challenging yourself with the big and the small, so as never to lose the joys of discovery and accomplishment.

Your teachers and Professors have challenged you with thought provoking assignments, papers, and projects. As you end this period of being examined and assessed, you will have to take on a new identity. You won’t officially be a student any more but don’t abandon your student identity completely. Instead, rework it. Maintain the lens of a student and with it, humility and curiosity. Question dogma, maintain courage to tackle the unknown and above all, remain open to learning.

Again, let me congratulate you on your success at Wits. It has led you to this exciting moment, this energized precipice. I hope that you never relinquish the important lens that your Wits education has given you!

Good luck with your next and future endeavors; you have so much to offer!