

Rev Gary's Final Sermon

Feckenham & Bradley Green 7th May 2018

Acts 20 : 17 – 38 “A Good Exit”

The Reading from Acts 20 marks the Paul's emotional farewell to the church in Ephesus. Miletus was once a busy port, only a few miles from Ephesus itself. Why do you think, when it was so close to the city of Ephesus, Paul didn't go back to see the elders of Ephesus? Maybe to avoid what I'm having to do now! Maybe he just couldn't face the big farewell.

Perhaps, I need to use Paul as an example. He speaks about the past, the present and the future to make the Elders realise the importance of their faith in Jesus. That sounds like a plan! May be there is something in what I am going to say that could mean something for you.

The Past

By saying Good Bye, Paul reminds them of the past, saying: “You know how I lived ...” and “I served you, even the midst of severe testing ...”

A woman was looking at a friend and thinking that he looked depressed. “What are you thinking about?” she

asked, “My future,” came the reply. “What makes it look so hopeless?” “My past.” Some people have such a bad past that they don’t want to think about their future.

As I look back over the last four years as your curate. My past has been fun - and boy I must have irritated you on occasions, as some of you have irritated me! Not every single second or every single day – that would be unrealistic! The irritation I mean! But I have so much to look back on with real thankfulness, and I hope you do too. Weddings on horseback, a wedding with a Double Decker Bus, Packed church school services, Me dressed as Darth Vader at Christmas. Singing carols with the old and frail at Parklands/HH/Rashwood. Being with a resident as she died in her home. Being there for people. Memories indeed.

Paul talked about times of ‘severe testing’.

I don’t want to dwell on this but there have been difficult times. The times I visited someone supposedly for last rites and they stayed with us for weeks afterwards. Triggering a safeguarding alert of a paranoid schizophrenic that just so happened to get my number from a parish newsletter and was worried about being poisoned.

During my curacy, I have taken the funerals of church members and non church members alike. Meetings with residents who felt that what I say should only be relevant to those who come to church. What, a vicar that preaches outside church – oh come on... Standing up for unjust aspects of our life in this place - like Foodbanks in 2018.

I will leave here with lovely memories of times in the schools, bringing unstuffy but reverent church into school, and the parents into church. Watching parents trying to recite The Lord's Prayer from memory at the beginning of the year, and being word perfect by July.

But enough of the past – let's look at the 'present' as we move on.

The Present

Paul says to the elders, *'And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.'*

Jesus says to us, "I will love you forever, I am yours for eternity and you are mine." His commitment to us as individuals is total and unconditional and unchanging.

He is committed to us when our present is wonderful and we can sense his presence and hear his voice. But he is also committed to us when our present is hard or

uncertain and when all we have to hold on to is a promise or a sense of call.

Perhaps some of us need to really hear that today because there may be change and uncertainty in all kinds of areas in your lives, not just in church.

How is your present? How is it really? My honest present – now, this minute – a slight degree of anxiety as I look at all the packing! More seriously, there is sadness to be leaving a community where my family has been happy for fifteen years . But, like Paul, I feel compelled to go over to the Malverns.

So my ‘greater present’ (outside of this moment) is actually really exciting, albeit uncertain in all sorts of ways. And so is yours.

Do you ever watch Bargain Hunt? It is required viewing across the Ministry Team - I gather both Wyn and Angela watch it - and so do I – on occasions. The host usually asks the person doing the auction: “Are you taking the auction today?” Invariably they say ‘yes’ and the host responds, “We’re in safe hands.”

Well, I am not too sure about that to be honest - in the sense that there are churches without Wardens, school governor vacancies, PCC numbers are down and the costs of our building repairs. But with Melissa as a Reader, and Fiona following on fast this year, that

is good news. In the last ten years, the Feckenham end has grown three Vicars - Sue Barratt, Barbara Wheatley and myself. We also can look forward to Rosie Moss from SP starting training for ordination too this autumn. And there is Wyn of course steadying the helm.

But that's enough about us all in clerical dress, there has been really good engagement with communities and congregations too - especially in the areas of Church maintenance and repairs – with two active Friends groups doing great things on the fundraising front. Who knows, additionally, - Bradley might well get its running water soon! I have been blessed to learn what can be done to make our churches the heart of our communities. I do hope that the communities see that.

Paul concludes his farewell address with some words about the future.

The Future

A fortune-teller, gazing into a crystal ball, said to a frog: *“You are going to meet a beautiful young woman. From the moment she sets her eyes on you she will have an insatiable desire to know all about you. She will be compelled to get close to you, you’ll fascinate her.”* Very excited, the frog asked, *“Where will this take*

place? A princess party? A singles bar?” “No,” said the fortune-teller, “A biology class.”

Paul had been warned by the Holy Spirit that his ‘biology class’ came in the form of prison and hardships. Now, I’m pretty used to prisons - but I have the keys and the finger print biometrics normally to get out! I have been influenced and challenged by those I have journeyed along side in prisons.

But there will be times of hardship along the way. The Christian Faith is a journey and it has to start somewhere. And who knew what would happen to me and my family when we settled (in Feckenham) here 15 years ago? May be it could happen to you?

Ministry across Wychebrook, is of course, is bigger than me. In a sense we are all here just for a season (read Ps103); we must be faithful in our season to and do what we can do and then pass on the baton for someone else to take the task forward and develop it.

Some things I’ve been passionate about may end once I’ve gone. Foodbanks, Shoeboxes over at Stoke Prior, Callow Hill. All up for grabs, if you choose to. Change something, do it a different way, drop it –

As the Bishop of Dudley will know doubt say to me and any of you that come to the installation on the 27th May - It’s all about the future now - for you as well as

me. Something new and exciting will come after. I am sure of that.

What about us? Paul was concerned that the church members keep an eye on one another and care for one another; “Keep watch over yourselves” he says.

That’s my concern too. Please don’t let a few people shoulder all the burdens and all the responsibilities; care for one another and don’t moan about one another or criticise when things inevitably get overlooked or done differently.

We need to think about letting go, doing things differently. Appreciate each other, build each other up, prepare expectantly for this new chapter in your life as I am preparing for my future. Remain welcoming, generous, outward focussed and mission minded rather than self-serving, inward looking and looking back to history. Seek to live and share the Gospel whenever you can.

Finally, the passage ends, *“When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never*

see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.”

Well, thankfully you are not going to accompany me to a ship but I know that you will be praying for us as the moving vans arrive at the end of June and you will remain in our prayers; particularly as the year progresses for us all. Hopefully a new role for my rock - Alison - A new school for Issy, maybe Uni for Harriet and a new college for Jess.

In parting from the elders in Ephesus, Paul shared his heart and bared his soul. When you care for someone very much saying goodbye causes a certain amount of grieving; it's natural but it's tough. Despite their tears and embraces, I think Paul made a graceful and good exit.

I'd like to do the same but forgive me if I don't emulate Paul and end up in tears.

Thank you for all you love, care and support. I have enjoyed my time with you, learnt and experienced so much and I hope that I have left you knowing that you are loved as God's children.

Amen