



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

13 September 2020: Matins Sermon

The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

Acts 20:17–end

The Venerable Jonathan Chaffey, The Archdeacon of Oxford

“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace”

Two millennia have passed yet St Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders resonates deeply for the church community of today. In 2019 Bishop Steven chose the passage for his charge to ordinands who were about to become deacons or priests within the Oxford Diocese. It has also been the focus over the last few months, in the diocesan councils and synods, for ‘Dwelling in the Word’. This is a practice that helps us to pay attention both to scripture and to one another. Listening to the passage read twice, with personal reflection in between and then sharing of themes, phrases or words with one another is a means of dwelling on what God might be saying today to his church. So I encourage you to read the story slowly and reflectively.

This event is a moment of pause in the midst of considerable missionary activity. It forms the conclusion of the middle section in the drama that is the Acts of the Apostles. In the earlier chapters Luke describes how the church was launched in the power of the Spirit, which in turn led to considerable growth particularly through the missionary journeys of St Paul, but alongside the missions of other apostles and deacons. In this pivotal chapter we see the shadow of trials and suffering that accompany the Gospel. On the beach at Miletus, about 30 miles west of Ephesus, there is a sense of the greater stage, the bigger story of the early church, the bigger reality of the inauguration of Jesus’ kingdom in the world. Affliction awaits Paul in his journey to Jerusalem, with arrest and eventual trial, imprisonment and martyrdom in Rome. Just as his preaching had provoked a riot in Ephesus, so the Kingdom of God will always draw opposition wherever alternative vested interests are lodged. This is inevitable until the return of Jesus and the final establishing of his Kingdom. The raw contrast between light and darkness, life and death, mortality and eternity, that is present on a cosmic level is unavoidably reflected in the life of the church on earth; it is this that accounts for the intimate relationship between a church leader and his or her flock.

Paul's farewell is not a speech day kind of address. The usual Roman farewell discourse would include the triumphs, successes, the titles gained. Paul uses this structure, topping and tailing his speech in such manner but the content is very different, revealing what one might describe as servant leadership. 'Serve to lead' is the motto of Sandhurst, the training academy for potential Army officers. Of course, this approach is recognised in wider leadership theory and practice. Within the BBC, the last Director General, Lord Hall, made it his aim to walk the shop floor. His successor, Tim Davie, has called for a greater focus 'on those we serve'. This model may not be as widely accepted as we would wish but is best exemplified in the words and practice of Jesus, who came as one who serves and who washed his disciples' feet. It is in the very nature of the God whom we worship; so it was for St Paul and so it can be for leaders in church and society today.

Paul describes not successes but toils, not personal gain but dedicated service, not applause but tears. Church culture is most healthy where there is freedom to talk openly, to reveal depths of passion and pain, to share sorrow as well as joy. If God knows us intimately and still loves us, how much more should we do so alongside our fellow pilgrims! I have learnt to value the depths of church fellowship. As a military chaplain I could sometimes be quite isolated, needing to draw deeply on personal disciplines of the scriptures and prayer. I have learnt that, however resourceful these spiritual practices might be, they are not complete without fellowship, the grace of giving and receiving openly within the wider family of the church. So it was that Paul could shed tears with, and embrace, his fellow Christians. Similarly, church community is most mature when it is not focussed on a particular leader. Paul does not attribute any results to himself but clearly gives the credit to God. He describes himself as the servant of Jesus (v19), who called him to this ministry (v24) and who gives him the Holy Spirit (v22). Paul even considered his life as nothing compared to finishing the race, completing his task. He was, in a real sense, accountable both to God and to those whom he served, shareholders together in the Kingdom of God.

Having outlined his manner of leadership, Paul then exhorts the elders to follow this model. Church leaders are shepherds, needing determination and watchfulness to be on their guard from savage opposition. It is a tough calling, but Paul reminds his successors that they themselves are called by the Holy Spirit (v28). He concludes by commending his successors 'to God and to the word of his grace' (v32). This is both a relief yet a reminder. God will fulfil his purposes but we need to keep under his authority and within his love.

Paul was clearly a great apostle, evangelist and teacher. He walked the walk, choosing to journey into danger to deliver his message. He gave himself for his flock. For any great cause we need a

sense of vocation and continued resourcing, especially if it is to bear the weight of lives. So it is with Christian leadership. An inspired message, combined with pastoral sensitivity and personal vulnerability, makes a winning combination. Its suitability as a model for church leadership today was put simply by Pope John Paul II: *“Evangelists must be experts in humanity; they must be in love with God and know the heart of man”*. St Paul knew this in reality. So he finished by kneeling down and praying together with his flock (v36). All this is reflected in the ordination charge for deacons and priests: *‘You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength but only by the grace and power of God. Pray therefore that your heart may daily be enlarged and your understanding of the Scriptures enlightened. Pray earnestly for the gift of the Holy Spirit’*.

Let us, then, pray for the church of today, its leaders and community life, in the Cathedral of Christ Church, across the city, the diocese and beyond. It undoubtedly has pains and challenges, yet it also contains a message underwritten by the grace and truth of the Gospel and resources to sustain it that come from heaven itself.

We use the Prayer of St Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit missionary order, adopted as the College Prayer for Cranwell, sister academy to Sandhurst:

*‘Teach us good Lord, to serve thee as thou deservest,
To give and not to count the cost;
To fight and not to heed the wounds;
To toil and not to seek for rest;
To labour and not to ask for any reward;
Save that of knowing that we do thy will. **Amen.***