

Over the years that I have been ordained, which was just six months before Tricia and I were married, we have made five moves from different places and church communities; none has been less than 320 miles. So, after four years in Cambridge as a curate, we moved to Hong Kong; after seven and a half years there, we moved to Bowness-on-Windermere in the Lake District; after nine years in the Lakes we moved to the Medway towns in Kent, where we spent eleven years before moving to Bahrain for nearly ten years; till our final move to Harborne. In each place that we have lived we have got to know and feel a part of the community - both the Church community and the wider community. In ministry you share with individuals and families in times of great joy, as well as times of deep sadness, so that moving on is not just about your own feelings, but dealing with the feelings and experiences of others.

The process of saying good bye is challenging, but important, for it gives opportunity to reflect on one's relationships and to appreciate one another, not to take one another for granted. It gives you the opportunity to reflect on and express where you have been together. And it reminds us that we are not indispensable, that life is often about responding to constant change and we need to learn afresh our dependency on God.

In our reading today we hear of Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders. Last Sunday, in our reading from Acts, we were in Ephesus. It was a city in which Paul spent two years, speaking in the synagogue and debating in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, *so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.*(Acts 19:10) So he'd got to know people there well; he had given of himself wholeheartedly. But, because of the riot, his exit from the city had probably been rather quicker than expected, though Luke tells us that Paul does gather disciples together *and after encouraging and saying farewell, he left for Macedonia.*(Acts 20:1) After some lengthy journeying visiting Greece, Macedonia and Troas outlined in the first twelve verses of Acts 20, he sails past Ephesus, *as he is eager to be in Jerusalem if possible on the day of Pentecost* (verse 16), but from Miletus he sends a message to the elders of the Church in Ephesus for them to come to meet him there, not a short journey (about forty miles).

So it is from Miletus that he says goodbye to the Ephesian elders, conscious that this is the last occasion that he will see them - for after visiting Jerusalem, he is determined to go to Rome. And I want to suggest that it is a model of what it means to say a healthy goodbye and to highlight briefly three aspects of Paul's goodbye that we can perhaps learn from:

1.) First, saying goodbye means appreciating our past relationships and articulating them. Paul reflects on his ministry in Ephesus. It has been full of challenges - *tears and trials* he mentions - but he has sought to be faithful to his calling, preaching to both Jews and Greeks, in public spaces but also in peoples' homes. Alongside his preaching/teaching ministry he supported himself, working presumably as a tentmaker, his trade as he had done in Corinth (Acts 18:3) and to care for others, to support the weak. Paul could look back on his ministry without shame or regret and it's clear that he loved and was loved by the Ephesian elders.

2).Secondly, saying goodbye means we accept God's leading above our own desires. It was clearly not the Ephesian elders' desire that Paul should leave them or not return, but Paul is clear that he feels compelled by the Spirit of God to journey to Jerusalem and it is this inner compulsion that he responds to. I would say that usually the inner compulsion of the Spirit is generally confirmed by other indications that a decision is according to God's will, but it cannot be ignored. Obedience to God, even if, as in Paul's case, it would lead to suffering (*imprisonment and persecutions* (23)) is more important than personal preferences. As he says in verse 24: *I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish the course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace.*

3).Thirdly, saying goodbye means we carefully prepare for the future. That's probably the chief reason that Paul calls the elders to come from Ephesus to meet him in Miletus. As in a relay race he passes the baton of oversight and responsibility of the Church in Ephesus to the elders. Paul warns them of challenges that they are likely to face: what he calls savage wolves, people who have false motives, teachers who are preoccupied with themselves, who develop a cult of personality, who will distort the message of the gospel. Finally he prays with and for them, *commending them to God and to the message of his grace* and hopefully they too pray for Paul. It is an emotional scene as they hug and kiss and release one another: the elders to return with added responsibilities to oversee the Church in Ephesus; Paul to his onward journey, with all its trials and tribulations, to Jerusalem and onto Rome.

Discussion Questions

1. Saying 'good bye' is important. Think of occasions when perhaps you have not been able to say 'goodbye' to someone and compare that to other occasions when you feel 'goodbye' has been done well. How have they felt different and what can we learn from this?
2. Paul talks about being *compelled by the Spirit* (verse 22) in his decision to go to Jerusalem. How do we discern the Spirit's leading in our lives, especially in the calling to move on?
- 3). Paul's final act in his farewell to the Ephesian elders is to kneel down with them and pray. There were tears, there were hugs, but all is given to God. How might prayer for one another in time of transition be expressed in the life of St Peter's?

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