

As regular viewers will know, we are in, this season of Lent, having our sermons based on Paul's missionary journeys as recorded in the book of Acts. This is a part of scripture which, for reasons I explained a couple of weeks ago, I haven't really looked at for 45 years. I had a bad experience in high school which left me scarred. I was forced to spend endless lessons in school plotting Paul's journeys, marking them on a map around the Mediterranean. And the chapter we're looking at today gave me terrible flashbacks. It triggered something in my memory. The paragraph before where our reading begins goes like this.

"We went ahead to the ship and set sail for Assos, intending to take Paul on board there, for he had made this arrangement intending to go by land himself. When he met us in Assos we took him on board, and we went to Mitylene. We sailed from there and on the following day we arrived opposite Chios. The next day we touched at Samos. And the next day after that, we came to Miletus, for Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he might not have to spend time in Asia. He was eager to be in Jerusalem if possible, on the day of Pentecost."

And all these years later, I still can't understand why that kind of detail is included in the Bible. I find that as boring now as I did when I was in high school. Clare Friedman, one of our most longstanding and well-respected members of the congregation, who was also educated in England, tells me that when she was naughty, and if you know Claire, that in itself is very hard to imagine. But anyway, when she was naughty, the teachers made her write out three pages of the book of Acts. I don't know what was going on in the English educational system at the time, but it seems to be that the biblical book of Acts was regarded as a form of punishment.

Anyway, I'm slowly learning to put my prejudices on one side and I'm discovering that, apart from paragraphs like the one I just read, there are real nuggets in Acts which can be a great benefit. So, I found our reading today, which carries on exactly after that paragraph I read, to give some really good practical advice about saying goodbye well, which I think is an important subject. This reading that we had is a farewell address.

On one of his missionary journeys, Paul had stopped in Ephesus and founded a church there. And in this passage, it begins by him calling together the leaders in that church, because he wasn't going to Ephesus anymore. He called the leaders to him. And our passage is one long goodbye. This is only the third of Paul's speeches recorded in the book of Acts. There's one in the first missionary journey to a Jewish congregation. Then last week, Rebecca spoke

about Paul's address to the Greek philosophers in the Areopagus in Athens. And today this one is addressed to the Christian leaders of the church in Ephesus. So this actually is the only one in Acts, the only speech, addressed to a Christian audience, which is why it sounds like one of Paul's epistles. As I said, it's a farewell speech. In fact, I think it's a model of a good goodbye. It's certainly better than other farewell speeches I could mention, but which I won't mention in this context.

Anyway, in recent times we've become even more aware of the need to end things properly because the pandemic has robbed us of so many of those opportunities. The pandemic has left us with a terrible feeling of unfinished business. Things haven't been able to end well. There's been a real pain in finishing school days without a proper graduation ceremony. I've had friends who were rectors who had to leave a parish without a parish party. They've kind of had to just sort of slope off. And of course, there's been the very deep and profound sadness of not having the chance to say a final farewell to loved ones as they die.

Some of the saddest images of the pandemic were of people dying alone. The pandemic robbed us of the chance to end things well, to say proper good and fitting farewells. And psychologists are becoming increasingly aware of the benefit of ending things well, not just for mental health, but also to prepare for a new transition and a new phase of life.

St. Paul must have been an expert in goodbyes. Many of us suffer from farewellphobia, but not Saint Paul. He never ducked a good farewell as we might. Saint Paul had lots of experience. He traveled around the Mediterranean, founding all these churches in different places. He'd go there, spend some months or even a year or two in a church. And then he'd moved on to somewhere else. So he'd had lots of practice at saying goodbye. And in this passage, we get an insight into his technique. So let's look at the passage and see what enabled to St. Paul to say a good goodbye.

Well, it's clear in this reading and other parts of Paul's writing that he had no regrets. In 2 Timothy, when he's close to death, he writes this. "The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith." Or as a sports commentator might say, he left it all on the field.

And we can see the same theme in this passage. Twice he says, "I didn't shrink from telling you anything. I told you all that I know," he's saying, "I held nothing back." Paul found it easier to say goodbye because he'd said all he wanted to say to the Ephesians, and he'd done with them

all he wanted to do. And it must be said, this is not a common experience.

In 2012, The Guardian newspaper published the findings of a nurse who specialized in caring for the terminally ill. And she identified five common regrets that just about, well, many of her patients expressed and they were these. Number one: I wish that I'd let myself be happier. People admitted that they feared change in their life. So they pretended they were content when they weren't. Number two: I wish I'd stayed in touch with my friends. Number three: I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings. Many of us suppress our feelings in order to keep the peace. Number four: I wish I hadn't worked so hard. Number five: I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself and not living up to the expectations of others.

Regrets such as these complicate farewells. If you are hearing this sermon, then you have the opportunity to act so that you can at least eliminate, if not get rid entirely, of your regrets. Related to Paul's lack of regrets is the second thing that helped him to be good at goodbyes, which was a very clear sense of what was valuable in life. Saint Paul knew the things he valued, and he spent his time investing in those things. I was reading a little self-help book this week and it was actually reading that book that helped me to understand what's going on in this passage with Saint Paul in our reading. I recognize that Paul lived out the life lessons outlined in this self-help book.

For instance, let me read a section from this book on the importance of recognizing the impermanence of life. The writer says, "Becoming aware that nothing lasts forever will show you that so doesn't time. By knowing that your time is limited, you start to give more importance to the things that matter in life. You become more satisfied with what you have and start making a better effort to enjoy the time you have with someone."

Paul spells out in the middle of the passage that we've read what most matters to him. He says, "I do not account my life of any value, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I receive from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." Elsewhere, in the book of Philippians, Paul records that all his material blessings, he lists all the things that he had going for him. And he concludes, "I count everything, all of it, a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord."

He says here in our passage for today, "I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing." And he could say that because he knew what was of real value. And that's where he invested his time and his energy. Nothing brought Paul

more pleasure than preaching the Gospel, seeing a small congregation of believers coming together and then nurturing them. He implored the leaders here of the church in Ephesus to care for the church of God, which God obtained with the blood of his own son. That's a big statement.

Do we recognize our church community as so valuable that we were obtained with the blood of Jesus Christ? Paul invested his life in building up churches around the Mediterranean because he saw the beauty and the enormous value in those communities of believers. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her with the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle, that she might be holy and without blemish." That is our calling. And Paul's not writing here about the church as a building. He's talking about the beauty and the value of a community of believers.

Finally, Paul was good at goodbyes because he was emotionally mature. And I think that's very evident in this passage. Paul is sometimes portrayed as being rather cold and rational. But we see another side of him in this passage. Yes, he was clearly an enormous intellectual, but he has a deep, emotional side. Three times he talks in this passage about shedding tears. And there's a beautiful image at the end of the passage of him and all these leaders gathered together, praying together and weeping together.

There's a deep pervasive sense of love in this passage. Paul loved these people and their church. But he didn't cling to them. He showed an admirable measure of detachment, which allowed him to face the reality of the situation and to say, yes, he loves these people. But they wouldn't see each other face-to-face ever again. He was happy to head off into the unknown, not knowing what was going to befall him next. "I'm going to Jerusalem," he said, "bound in the spirit, not knowing what shall befall me there." Paul was confident enough in himself and in God's care of him that he could leave the comfort of familiarity behind and step into the unknown.

So here's what I think Paul can teach us about saying farewell properly. To do it well, we like Saint Paul must live without regrets to invest our time and energy in what we recognize as of being real value. And we must develop our emotional maturity. Let's all learn from Saint Paul and say our farewells well. Amen