

# Farewell Sermon

19<sup>th</sup> April 2015

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Easter

**Reading:** Luke 24:36b-48

Over the years I've said goodbye many times to many people in many different places. For a time our lives converge. We come together from all over the place. Here today there are people who have spent their whole lives in Ipswich, and there are people who have come to Australia as refugees. We are all one. Today, here, right now, we are all one. What a political statement! We gather as equal members of the body of Christ. Our two congregations are equal, and they are one. One is not more important than the other. And it's to this combined community that I say goodbye today, for *you* are the ongoing church of St Paul in Ipswich, and the time has come for me to leave you and to embark on another stage of my spiritual pilgrimage.

I haven't held back from telling you how difficult this parish has been at various moments of my time with you. But I don't feel this today. I only feel within myself gratitude: gratitude for being given the task of spiritual leadership in this community over these past three years; gratitude for all the moments of grace that I've experienced in fellowship with you; gratitude even for the tough times which I've found myself facing as I've wrestled with the question: how is it possible to lead this community forward? Yet the answers have always come from my relationships with you. I've learned that this community is filled with faithful people who, like myself, are trying to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. I've watched as this community has reached out and embraced our Sudanese brothers and sisters with acceptance and love, and I've been overwhelmed by the love I've received from my brothers and sisters from South Sudan, who've experienced suffering far greater than I'll ever face, and yet who, with great humility, express their gratitude to God for all the blessings bestowed on them. I've watched the sacrificial work of so many people in this parish, as you faithfully seek to serve Christ in humble ways. I've not agreed with everything, just a many of you have not agreed with me. Yet before I came to St Paul's, this church prayed for the right pastor to come, and suddenly here I was, in all my weakness – yes, and also some gifts to share – and I truly believe that God has blessed us together. Is there room for improvement? Yes. Is there need for more growth in grace? You bet! Yet, I'm thankful that Christ is present among us, and that, with the strength that God gives, this church can still live into its Mission Statement: 'To be a vibrant centre of Christian spirituality in the heart of the city.'

I've always believed in the priesthood of all believers. We are all part of the priesthood of Christ. I accept that there was something in my DNA that led me into this strange life called '*the* priesthood', in which people like me are set aside to lead Christian communities, which I've done over thirty years in three different countries, as my Sudanese colleagues have also

done. But the point is this: we are all one in Christ Jesus. Your calling in everyday life is just as important as mine. We are all, from greatest to least, seeking God's strength and wisdom to enable us to be followers of Jesus in the world. We have different gifts, to be sure. Mine are of a certain type, and so are yours. I guess my calling is also of a particular kind: to lead the church deeper into Christ. Sometimes this leads to moments when priest and people rub against each other. Is this just a power struggle, or what? Where is Christ in times of conflict in the church, as we have experienced during my time at St Paul's? Let me say this much: in spite of the pain these moments have caused you and me, I believe Christ has been present, sharing the struggle, and through it all I see signs of grace. Together we've experienced the pain of being Christ's body, for Christ himself suffered, and we share in his sufferings. The real issue is whether we, as Christ's body, are also open to the transformative power of the resurrection.

Jesus stood among the disciples on Easter Day, when they'd given up hope completely. We all know how they felt. They were confused, frightened, out of their depths, grief-stricken, filled with sadness and a sense of failure, clinging to each other but not knowing what to do next, and then there he was, standing among them, dead but alive, not like them but like them, physical yet also spiritual, and what did he say to them? 'Peace be with you.' He stepped forward and beckoned them into a new world in which peace and love and forgiveness are both first and last. He embraced them with the power of love, so deep that it swept them off their feet. He invited them to step into an adventure that God had been working on since the beginning of time, when matter was swept into being by the overwhelming life-force of divine love. He told them that the resurrection is a sign of the life-power of God. 'Step into the adventure,' he said, and he sent them out in his name into the world.

As a boy I loved adventure stories. I read as many books as I could get my hands on, about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, or Francis Drake, or Robin Hood, or Hornblower, and many more. Later I'd learn about American heroes like Washington and Lincoln, and modern saints like Tutu and Mandela and Martin Luther King, people who stood up against all the forces that tear us down, who stood for what's good and right and true.

I found this in the Bible too. From a very young age the Bible was an integral part of my life. We had a Bible picture book at home, and a children's encyclopaedia full of stories and pictures of heroes and saints. I always loved Moses and David and Peter and Paul. Later I would learn that they, too, made mistakes like me, and experienced all the ambiguities and anxieties that I face.

But Jesus was the most powerful figure of all. As a boy I was overwhelmed by his faith, his love, his courage, his parables, his life and death and resurrection. I've spent all my life wrestling with the meaning of his life, and I still do. Only in more recent times has it occurred to me that he was such an adventurer, that he had a vision of the kingdom of God

so different from how we see things that people find it hard to grasp. He actually saw what was possible. He lived in a world of spiritual imagination so rich with life and colour and joy and love that others were drawn to him without really knowing why. Yet their hearts told them that what he said was true, even if their minds were still struggling to understand. As we all do. But this coming-to-understand is all part of the adventure of living, all part of discovering who and whose we are. This is the pilgrimage we're all on; this is why we're here today, drawn together from all over the world, yet all one in Christ Jesus.

Today I leave you to take this adventure and make it the central purpose of St Paul's: to let the creativity and love of God fill this church community and draw others into the spell of God's love. I urge you to let go of those things that hold us back, and to allow Christ to be all in all, to seek to love as he loved, to think as he thought, to live as he lived, and to allow death and resurrection to be the daily pattern of your lives: dying to sin and rising to newness of life. This is the meaning of our baptism.

It's always hard to know what to say when you say goodbye, but I leave these words with you, and I pray that God will bless you and keep you always. Amen.

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St Paul's Anglican Church  
Ipswich*

*May you be filled  
with the courage of Jesus,  
the faith of Jesus,  
the love of Jesus,  
the creative imagination of Jesus.  
May you walk in his footsteps  
every day of your life.  
May your pilgrimage never end.  
May you never cease to seek for truth and beauty,  
and to believe in love and kindness.  
May you find God in all things,  
and in the face of your neighbour.*

*And may the God of endless adventure,  
Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life,  
greater than great,  
more loving than love,  
closer than close,  
be among you and remain with you always.*

*Amen.*