

A painful parting – Acts 20: 17 – 38



The Acts of the Apostles begins with a farewell, as Jesus leaves His disciples to return to His Father in heaven. When I wrote about that event several months ago I referred to the way the disciples accepted what had happened, apparently without an overwhelming sense of loss. That was because they knew Jesus was still present in their midst. Even though He was no longer with them physically, they experienced the guidance and power of His Spirit dwelling within them.

St Paul's parting from the leaders of the church in Ephesus, however, was a deeply painful occasion. He had spent two years in the city, before travelling on to Europe, and it is clear he was dearly loved by the Christian people there. Now he was in a hurry to get back to Jerusalem, and he knew it would be impossible to pay a fleeting visit to Ephesus, because so many folk there would want to meet with him again. So he stopped at the port of Miletus, some way down the coast, and sent a message to the leaders of the Ephesian church, asking them to come and meet him there.

St Luke gives an account of his farewell speech to the elders of Ephesus. In it Paul speaks of the way the Holy Spirit is leading him back to Jerusalem. At the same time, he tells them, the Spirit is warning him that troubles and imprisonment are awaiting him there. Paul's eagerness to return to Jerusalem, whatever lay ahead of him in the city, reminds me of his Master, who, as Luke puts it in his Gospel, "steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Chapter 9, verse 51, Authorised Version).

Back in April, Her Majesty the Queen addressed the UK and the Commonwealth from Windsor Castle, and quoted from the song made famous by the late and greatly loved Vera Lynn, "We'll Meet Again". The hardest part of the farewell for the Ephesian church leaders was the knowledge that they and Paul would not meet again, at least not in this life.

They wept as they hugged and kissed Paul, and walked with him to wave him off at the quayside. It is clear that there was genuine warmth and affection in their relationship with him. This is a real human story about real human beings, who, just like us, knew how hard it can be to say goodbye.

A prayer:

Heavenly Father, we think of the people dear to us from whom we are separated because of Covid-19 restrictions, and family and friends far away. We thank you for modern technology that helps us keep in touch with them.

We remember, too, loved ones who have departed from this life, for whom we continue to feel a deep sense of loss. We thank you for our good memories of them, and for all they still mean to us.

Most of all, we give you thanks for the knowledge that neither distance nor death can separate us from your love. Grant us the assurance that your love surrounds our dear ones as it surrounds us. In this life and in the next, your love still unites us.

We look forward to the time when all your people meet again at Jesus' feet, and we offer our prayers in His name. AMEN

- Rev John Barnett

Image: St. Paul, detail from the transept of the Metropolitan Cathedral, Sao Paulo, Brazil.