

Sermon for the Sunday After the Ascension - 4 May 2008

Preached at Alnham Church

I absolutely hate saying goodbye. I get all soppy and tearful, remembering all those times when I have said it to someone for the last time. The way that people say goodbye is very personal, particularly the big goodbyes, the ones that happen when you drop your child at school for the first time, or when they leave home, perhaps to go away to university, or as in my case, to the Army. I can still see my parents waving on the dockside as the mailboat pulled away. Or when a dear colleague that we find we've got so used to leaves for another job, or a good friend emigrates, or a loved one prepares to die. In short, when the people we love move on.

I am sure you all have had to say goodbye - it may have been a bedside, in a hospital, when you don't know whether you will not see the person again in this life - but you don't want that thought to show in your body language. Maybe, and I have had this, we have to 'give permission' for the loved one who is dying of terminal cancer or some other ghastly disease, They need to accept that they are dying, that it really is time to say those last things. And then they can let themselves go - they know that we are all ready for it.

Some people are very expressive: it's all tears, hugs and stories. Others are deadpan, keeping it all in. Many people make sure that they say their goodbyes beforehand, when they've got time and emotions are not quite so high. Important things can't always be said and done on the doorstep.

In our Gospel reading from John, we are hearing to just such a goodbye. I once had the privilege of reading the whole of the Gospel of John aloud to a Church full of people. As you get further and further into it, you realise that Jesus is really urgently trying to get everything said to the disciples before they are parted. He gets irritated when they are being thick - he chides them for their lack of understanding of all that he had taught them in deed first of all and then in word. The pace and the importance of the message quickens.

John Chapters 13 to the end of 17 are a goodbye – they are often called the last discourse. Maybe Jesus didn't actually say it all at the Last supper - a bit like when the gospel Writer has assembled a lot of Jesus teaching and sited it on a hillside by the Lake - the sermon on the Mount. Jesus knows, I think, that

once he has faced up to the awful doubt and fear of gethsemane, and his betrayal, he will not have much more time to say anything at all to his disciples, his dear friends - and I do count Judas in that. They won't have time to say goodbye later, so now he talks of how the disciples are to behave, of how they will be bound together into a community of love, and that this will give them their distinctive and attractive nature as the people of God. Rather alarmingly, he tells them that things will be hard easy without him, but that they will be empowered by the Holy Spirit when he leaves.

When he leaves. Yes, you see, He has told them several times that he will have to leave them - he has said several times that he will be killed. They have disregarded it - the same way that we don't open envelopes we know will contain unwelcome news. Bills perhaps, or a telegram (in the days when you got them) - if you are half expecting the worst, you really don't want to have it confirmed. You would rather have a small patch of hope left - that things will turn out for the best. So would the disciples. They didn't want to hear this.

And in chapter 17, Jesus rounds it all off with a prayer. And what a prayer it is! Jesus has told them before that he and the Father are one; now he again claims God's glory as his own. Then he prays for them, for his followers: those who have believed that he is the Son of God, and who very soon will find themselves the keepers and tellers of the message. Somehow, this little band of apparently untrained, uneducated men have become bound up with God. To them is being passed the flame of truth and the Gospel of salvation. I don't think they realise the magnitude and the majesty of the task. This is the task, incidentally, that has been passed down to you and me through the ages. From that point on there is an unshakeable bond between God and humankind – something wholly different about the way that human beings relate to God. It is through the cross - the total self-giving love of Jesus.

And, as we all celebrated last Thursday, we see Jesus restored to glory. Yes, he had laid aside his majesty, and his power, and his great divine knowledge. He had become flesh of your flesh and mine. And then he became a slave - and eventually he died. But God restored him, not just to a new life, a different life. But God restored him to glory.

There wasn't much of a good-bye on the hill there. Jesus had said all that needed to be said. He simply blessed them and was taken up in a cloud - the symbol from ancient times of God's glory. And he blessed them.

Luke tells us While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

So it wasn't Goodbye. It wasn't a final farewell. It was literally A Dieu - to God. Implying in this case that there was a return. He was coming back.

In Luke's first account of Jesus' Ascension we read: 50 And he led them out until *they were* over against Bethany: and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. 51 And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven. 52 And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy: 53 and were continually in the temple, blessing God.

That's why the farewell was not miserable. They were joyful. He was coming back. The departure was like saying goodbye to the wedded couple as they leave on their honeymoon. We know there will be a joyful return.

And here we are, all these years on. Somehow, the emotion and urgency of the moment in the upper room are gone, and the wonder and the joy of Bethany when Jesus returned to his father, with the promise of the Angels that he would come back again.

Are we still living in joyful expectation, knowing for sure that Jesus has never broken a promise? Or do we live in doubt, beginning to feel that it is only a small shred of hope, nothing more. But Jesus' prayer still stands; still echoes across the centuries. I pray that they will be one as we are one. A Palestinian peasant claims to be one with God, and something in the fabric of the universe shifts. Humankind and God are bound together when they were once set apart, and an unshakeable bond is formed that cannot be broken by human frailty and petty mistakes. Things are possible that were never possible before. Things will change that we never thought would change.

That's how we should be looking at Easter and the Ascension. The beginning of an amazing change. Certainly I know there has been a change in me - and God isn't finished with me yet. Who knows, I might turn out quite well after all. God isn't finished with any of us as he draws us, day by day, closer to him,

in union with the Father. Think about that. We - us - we few - are being drawn into close and deeper relationship with the creator of the universe - unimaginable power and glory. And we are called to live in that hope - and it isn't a paltry little patch of hope, trying to push away and delay the expected bad news. No, this hope is glorious. We shall be one with Christ - and we must be united in a common mind in Jesus here and now.

That's what the ascension means to me. Not a gloomy farewell. A glorious, wonderful hope.