

The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity (second service)

St Thomas, Salisbury.

Ezekiel 20:1-8, 33-44

Acts 20:17-end

What would you say, if you knew that you were having the last conversation you were ever going to have with someone? Almost none of us, of course, get to choose the exact time of our departure from this world, so almost none of us know when our last conversation is upon us. But I guess that most of us would hope that our last words, particularly to the people we love the most, would be honest, heartfelt, and constructive.

In our second lesson this evening we find St Paul departing from Miletus, which is in modern day Turkey, to sail back to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. And before he goes he calls the elders of the church in Ephesus, and delivers what he is fairly sure be his last words to them. We heard in that lesson that it has been made known to him by the Holy Spirit that if he returns to Jerusalem he is likely to be imprisoned and persecuted. As indeed it transpires. He won't see them again.

And what we find of course is consistency in his teaching, and actually an appeal above all else for the people he is leaving behind to be stable. To maintain their balance. And that quality of stability, of maintaining equilibrium, not making too many sudden course corrections, has become embedded in the identity particularly of the Western monastic tradition, and is summed up in the vow of stability that Benedictines make, and is also deeply embedded in the Church of England, or at least it has been traditionally, because the Church of England of course is deeply Benedictine as well.

What does Paul say to these people amongst whom he has lived for years, when he gets this rare opportunity to make some last words:

He says repent before God, have faith in Christ, don't lose hope. Support the weak. Put more store in giving than receiving.

And he says don't be buffeted. When I'm gone you will be tempted to make one course correction after another. You will be tempted to rush after every new idea, to try to give yourself confidence, to make up for the gap that I have left in your life. Don't do that, he says. That's what people always do when they're insecure, and of course it's what our first lesson from Ezekiel is all about as well. Don't do that. Be alert, keep watch.

So for us too, this is sound advice. We are well away from any of the exciting seasons of the church year, here on the umpteenth Sunday after Trinity. And we all experience in our own lives moments where the system seems to break down and we feel ourselves abandoned, or unable to hear the reassuring, steady voice. So then, for us too, the watchword is stability. With roots deep down into the tradition, into the absolutely unbreakable promises of God, we can be assured, and we can pray, as we will sing in a few moments: 'Eternal light, shine in my heart; eternal hope, lift up my eyes: eternal power, be my support; eternal wisdom, make me wise.'