

Hello and Goodbye

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[0 : 00] Great, well I'm here and we're very grateful for how welcomed we feel, Kathy and I as we've arrived at St Silas and arrived in Glasgow, so thank you for your welcome.

But what exactly am I here to do? Across this room there will no doubt be lots of different expectations about what the new rector should be like.

And understandably I can tell sometimes as I've talked to people that some of you are kind of trying to pick up on things I say and perhaps wondering even a bit nervously, what's he going to prioritise? So what are ministers for? I came across this recently, it's the job description of the perfect pastor. The perfect pastor preaches for exactly 20 minutes.

He condemns sin roundly but never hurts anyone's feelings. He works from 8 in the morning until midnight and is also the church caretaker.

[1 : 01] He is 35 years old and has 40 years experience. He never forgets a name and spends most of his time in prayer.

He also knows when somebody is sick and needs visiting even without anyone telling him about it and he spends most of his time in sermon preparation. He loves to spend time with his family but has no problem with you dropping in unexpectedly.

He remembers everyone's birthdays and anniversaries. He eats nutritiously, sleeps well and easily, exercises daily and is always there to listen to you night or day.

He has a burning desire to work with teenagers and he spends most of his time with the elderly. He doesn't overburden the church finances so he looks for a full-time secular job as well.

He never misses the meeting of any church committee and spends most of his time out there in the real world doing evangelism. Well it went on and on actually, I'll stop there.

[2 : 09] But you can see already the problems that we could run into together. So what should we expect from the new rector? What standards should I aspire to and be held to? And how can you pray for me as your rector?

Well what does God say? That's why we're in Acts chapter 20. Acts is written by Dr. Luke who wrote Luke's Gospel. It's kind of volume 2 for him. And in Acts he tells the story of God's unstoppable word.

Jesus has risen from the dead. He's ascended into heaven. And now the early church explodes by the power of God's spirit as his word goes out across the world.

Now Paul was one of the key figures in that explosion. And he spent three years in a city called Ephesus planting a church. By Acts chapter 20 that we're in this morning, Paul was on his way to Jerusalem.

But when he got near Ephesus on his way back to Jerusalem, he couldn't resist meeting the elders of the church he planted one last time. So we see that in verse 17.

[3 : 12] From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. So this is the speech on the beach. And it's a vital speech. It's the only speech in the whole book of Acts that's actually addressing Christians rather than trying to speak to those who are not yet believers.

Let's learn from Paul's speech. It was his goodbye speech to them. But in a way, it's kind of my hello speech to you. What should a pastor prioritize in his ministry?

Let me say as well, this isn't just relevant for kind of analyzing what the rector is for. Because Paul here is addressing the elders, plural, of that church. And so I guess for any of us involved in any kind of Christian leadership, we should learn from how Paul charged those elders.

So it's vital. And we should also be thinking as well, as we hear Paul, if the leaders of the church are meant to be like this, what should the church look like?

How should this affect all of us if the leadership is like this? Three points for us this morning. The perfect pastor teaches the truth. The perfect pastor keeps watch. And the perfect pastor sheds tears.

[4 : 24] So first of all, the perfect pastor teaches the truth. Just have a look with me again at verse 20. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that will be helpful to you, but have taught you publicly and from house to house.

So Paul taught comprehensively. What I mean by that is that he taught everyone, everything, everywhere. He taught everything.

Did you notice that? Verse 20 says he preached anything that would be helpful to them. What about the bits of the Bible that are controversial? What about the bits that might put people off?

Well, look at verse 27, a bit further down. Paul says, For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. In fact, it's striking how that relates to the sentence before, isn't it?

He says in the sentence before, He is innocent of their blood. This is kind of life or death to Paul. Why is he innocent of their blood? For he has not hesitated to teach them the whole will of God, the whole Bible.

[5 : 33] So as I teach, as a minister teaches, we should be letting God set the agenda. Not just picking the bits that we like, picking the bits we know other people will like, but working through the Bible.

Paul taught everything. He also taught the truth bravely, courageously. Did you notice that in verse 20? He said, You know that I have not hesitated. Very interesting, isn't it?

Why do you think he says he hasn't hesitated? It's because when you teach the truth, sometimes we don't want to hear it. It's true of non-Christians, people who are not yet Christians.

Paul says in verse 21, I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. Well, that word repentance is to turn around.

If you know where the rectory is, where we've moved into, it's on Crow Road, which is just south of this big junction, Anisland Cross. And so what I've found is as I drive north up Crow Road now, my Irish sat-nav woman, I have an Irish girl, she's called Erin.

[6 : 40] It's very sort of relaxing when you're lost, the Irish accent. And she says, Perform a U-turn. Perform a U-turn as we drive past the house. And so it happens every day.

But that's what repenting is. Repentance is just turning around. To receive the gift of forgiveness from God, we have to turn away from our sin, what we want to be forgiven for.

Now that's not what people want to hear. It puts people off at times when we offer that message. And so we get tempted to water it down, to not mention the bit about turning away from our wrongdoing.

But Paul says he was brave. He didn't hesitate. And of course that's not just true with those who are still making up their mind about Jesus. It's true of Christians as well.

So he said in verse 20, to the Christians, to the elders, I have not hesitated to preach anything that will be helpful to you. None of us likes to be told by God that we need to change, that we've got something wrong.

[7 : 43] What we'd like actually is a God who agrees with us all the time. But we should expect that when the pastor teaches the truth faithfully from the Bible, it will correct us, all of us, and it will confront us.

And that's because the Bible is true. The Bible isn't culturally bound. It's God's word for every culture at every time. So wherever we live, whether it's Scotland in 2016, or it's another part of the world today, or some point in history or in the future, in any culture, as the Bible is opened as God's timeless word, it will have things to say that we find difficult and challenging, that corrects our own culture and values.

The perfect pastor teaches the truth. I don't know what you think about that today, but I think it's quite controversial. In our postmodern, pluralistic society, we've learned to be suspicious of someone who kind of says, I've got the truth to tell you.

It sounds arrogant. Perhaps it sounds divisive. We hear people with the attitude, well, whatever you choose to believe, that's true for you. But if you think about it, we all know that we need the truth.

We need the truth about God because God made us to know him. It's a bit like Kathy and I have just arrived here, and we're hoping to build friendships with you.

[9 : 11] Now just imagine if somebody told you some things about us before we got to know you well. Imagine if they said, you know Martin, he's a vegetarian, never goes anywhere near meat.

And you know Kathy, well, it's quite interesting, before she had children, she was a firefighter. And you might think, that's great, I can't wait to meet them. But none of those things are true.

So we sort of have to recover lost ground as we met. And so it is with God. For us to have a real relationship with him, we need the truth. We need the truth about God to know him, but we also need the truth about God if we're to know ourselves.

See, there's people around us who will tell us that our lives don't have any purpose or meaning. Or significance that we're just byproducts of chemical interactions and DNA.

Well, is that true? Or is there more to us? Are we made so that human beings have value and purpose? We need to know God and the truth from him about ourselves. So let me ask you, if you'll make it your ultimate priority for me as the new rector, that you will hear the truth from me.

[10 : 21] Because for the Christian, truth is food. It nourishes, it builds us up, it makes us grow. Truth is food. We should come into St. Silas feeling, I'm hungry.

I'm hungry to know God better. I want the truth. And did you notice where you'd have to go in Paul's day to hear the truth in Ephesus? In verse 20, he said this, So I guess, from Paul's perspective, it's not enough just to hear the truth every Sunday morning at St. Silas.

That's the public teaching of the truth. But Paul visited people to teach them. Presumably they met together in houses at different points in the week to hear God's truth.

Because without the truth, we don't grow. And all around this great city of Glasgow, people are perishing because they've not heard the truth about God.

So did you notice Paul's commitment in verse 24? Have a look at verse 24. Extraordinary. Paul says this, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me, the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

[11 : 49] Paul is comprehensive. He teaches everything to everyone everywhere. He's courageous. He doesn't hold back. And he's committed. He considers other people's opportunity to hear the truth of God's grace and be saved.

So important, he values it above his own life. That's our first point. The perfect pastor teaches the truth. Secondly, and more briefly, the perfect pastor keeps watch.

He keeps watch because we are in real danger. Just have a look at verse 29. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.

I don't know whether you've ever seen wildlife programs where there are wolves. The sheep will just be grazing and it's this lovely kind of pastoral scene, very peaceful. And the wolves attack.

Within minutes, it's utterly horrific. Blood everywhere. Limbs everywhere. Maimed animals. Bleating. It's absolutely devastating.

[12 : 58] That's the picture that Paul uses here. It's the picture Jesus used for a church when there's a false teacher in the church. And false teachers, they don't arrive with a t-shirt on saying, I'm a false teacher.

Have a look at verse 30. Paul says, even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

So they even come from within. They start out as Christians that we know and trust. And they don't ignore the truth. That would be easy, wouldn't it, to spot if someone kind of said they were a Christian teacher and they never opened the Bible.

But that's not the approach, you see. They don't ignore it. They distort the truth. So the Bible is still being used. It's being taken seriously. But it's being distorted.

And why is that? Why would someone do that? Well, it's to build a following. To draw disciples after them. So we have to have room in our understanding of the churches in Glasgow, the churches in our country, for Paul's warning here and the Apostles' warning that there are wolves leading churches everywhere.

[14 : 12] False teachers in the pulpits. Teachers who started out believing the Bible and teaching it. But over time, unable to resist the temptation to distort it, to get a following for themselves.

And if you get drawn after somebody like that, you get drawn away from Jesus. That's why it's so deadly serious. Wolves. So what's the solution to all that?

Well, the solution is to have shepherds. Have a look at verse 28. Paul says to those elders, keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. So as your rector, I have to watch myself. I have to make sure I don't become a wolf.

And the Holy Spirit has given me the task of keeping watch over you as well. It's a striking picture, isn't it, of a shepherd. Shepherds have authority to look after sheep, but they sacrifice themselves for the sheep.

[15:19] They want to nurture them but protect them as well. And Paul drives home the point in verse 31. He says, so be on your guard. He says that when he was their shepherd, he warned them night and day.

I don't know what you think about that, but I think that's quite a surprise to hear Paul prioritizing that. See, there's lots that I'm already learning at St. Silas that is going on. Loads of great active stuff going on.

And there'll be lots of that that you'd love me to be involved in and I'll love to be involved in. We're a church with activities and programs and good children's work and we're trying to reach out to the local community and to our colleagues and friends around.

But I wonder when we're thinking about all that how often we'd say, you know, what we really need from our new minister is that he will keep watch and guard us against heresy.

Because there's a lot of false teaching around in the churches in Glasgow and we need a minister who'll keep watch over us. That's what Paul wanted from the elders in Ephesus and it's what we need today.

[16:25] But if we're frightened by the danger, the warning there, we should be frightened a bit. Let's also be reassured by verse 32. You see, Paul goes on to say, Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

There's reassurance there. You see, a false teacher could destroy you and your faith. But the Bible that Paul describes here wonderfully as the word of God's grace, that's got everything we need to be built up and saved.

Faithful shepherding teaching of the word of God's grace is what we need. And how should I come across as I do that? What should my manner be like as the new minister here?

Well, that's our third point. The perfect pastor teaches the truth. He keeps watch. And thirdly, the perfect pastor sheds tears. Did you notice as it was read by Morag how packed with emotion Paul's speech is?

Just look again at verse 19. He says, I served the Lord with great humility and with tears. Then in verse 31 he's crying again. So be on your guard.

[17:41] Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. As he leaves in verse 36 when he said this he knelt down with all of them and prayed.

They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. In the next verse Luke says, after we torn ourselves away, they tore themselves from these people.

So why all the crying? Well, they're tears of commitment. Paul, as a good pastor, was absolutely committed to the people God had given him to love.

So as he starts to remind them what he was like, he can say to them in verse 18, you know, you know how I lived. the whole time I was with you. Paul wasn't living in an ivory tower and popped up now and again to preach a sermon at them.

No, he was with them. You know, I was with you. This is a man of integrity. There was no do as I say, don't do as I do with Paul. Paul could say to them, if you want to know what the Christian life looks like, watch me.

[18:52] Isn't that an extraordinary thing to be able to say? I find that really daunting, conscious of my own failings, but that's the standard for Christian leadership. I remember being with a non-Christian friend once before church and we were just spending time together and I said at one point, right, I've got to go now because of the service and he said, have you got to go and get your game face on?

Which I guess was his way as a non-Christian of thinking, well, you've got a public role and you probably have to put on a facade for that. Well, that's not what a Christian leader could ever do. Paul walked his talk. He was a man of humility in verse 19. So his ministry wasn't about his own ego, it was about their growth in Christ. He was a man of contentment and hard work.

So at the end of his speech he says that he didn't cover anyone's riches, that he worked hard to supply his own needs while he was there and he was generous and sacrificial. So you should expect and pray for me that I will show the same kind of genuine personal commitment to you and to your growth as this.

Tears of commitment. They're also tears of friendship. Paul's three years in Ephesus created close ties clearly and they're heartbroken, aren't they, that he's going.

[20 : 11] And I hope that as we all pull together and partner together to serve Christ and to reach people around us for him that we become great friends. So as we finish there's something else just to point out in this passage as well and it helps us to understand why anybody would ever take on this job of being a pastor.

I mean, why would you do this after what I've just said? It's a job where you're called to teach the truth when people don't want to hear it because it's confronting and they don't welcome you because of your teaching.

It's a job where you're called to keep watch and be aware that there are false teachers who will of course hate you because you stand against them. It's a job where you work hard, set an example, give generously and end up spending a lot of your time in tears.

Christian ministry, anyone? Well, we can do it and I can do it because of who Paul is following here. All through this passage under the surface, Luke wants us to see that Paul is being like Jesus. He's defending Paul in this account of Paul's speech by showing that he was just like Jesus was before him. You see, Jesus knew that he was going to be killed in Jerusalem and he set his face for Jerusalem.

[21 : 33] He went to the cross for others and Paul here, he follows actually literally the same path. You see, in verse 22, he's been warned that hardship faces him in Jerusalem but he sets his face for Jerusalem.

He follows Jesus but there is a difference. You see, Paul left this meeting on the beach surrounded by the support of friends. But picture Jesus in the garden.

He asks his disciples to pray with him and they sleep. Picture him in the courtyard as he looks at Peter as Peter denies him again.

Jesus met his darkest hour deserted by his friends and he did that so that he could win us back and call us his friends. So in Christian ministry, I can strive to teach the truth because Jesus is the truth and he did that for me that I might know him.

I can strive to keep watch to be a good shepherd because ultimately Jesus Christ is our good shepherd and we're his sheep and he laid down his life for us.

[22 : 46] We can shed tears of commitment to the task Jesus gives us because Jesus first committed himself to us and it cost him everything. And we can shed tears of friendship because Jesus died alone, abandoned by his friends so that he could call us his friends and welcome us into his family.

Man of sorrows, what a name for the son of God who came ruined sinners to reclaim. Let's pray together. Father in heaven, who is worthy to such a task as this?

And yet we thank you that the Lord Jesus Christ is building his church to be his bride, that you have chosen a people to be your special gift to your son and that nothing, not even the gates of hell, will stand against your will and your plan.

And so we pray, Father, that mindful of what Jesus has done for us, you will help us here to be a church where the truth of your word runs through everything from the leadership across our congregation.

We long that truth will be food for us, that by your spirit we will grow up as believers and we long that that truth will ring out across this great city once again, that many more would turn back to you in repentance and faith.