



Sermon: - 8th May 2016

Famous Last Words

Watching the election coverage this week brought to mind a recent election, and some of the reactions to the unexpected results of the exit polls. “If these exit polls are correct I’ll publicly eat my hat!” Who said that? Paddy Ashdown. Alastair Campbell made a similarly rash promise “If these exit polls are correct I won’t eat my hat but I’ll eat my kilt!” Famous last words – which these two men lived to regret. But the phrase “Famous Last Words” really refers to deathbed utterances, and there are whole books devoted to recording them. They are all very different, as you would expect. Some are wise and some are witty. Some are pertinent and some are poignant. Here are some of them.

Oscar Wilde *“Either this wallpaper goes or I do!”*

Lord Palmerston *“Die! My dear doctor, that’s the last thing I shall do.”*

Queen Elizabeth I *“All my possessions for one moment of time.”*

Heinrich Heine *a German poet, when he was informed on his deathbed that God would forgive him, “Yes, that’s his job!”*

Famous last words, the very phrase has become a catch phrase. We find a person’s last words fascinating. Why is that? Why do we listen so eagerly to the words that someone utters with their dying breath? Perhaps because we think that when someone is about to die they are not going to waste that last breath on something trivial. Maybe we believe that they will say something of significance or importance.

In the passages that we read today, Jesus was not about to die, but his relationship with the disciples was about to undergo a fundamental change. He was leaving them in charge! And so he says the last words that he will utter on earth. Are these words not significant? Are these words not of crucial importance to us?

So what are these last words of Jesus? What does he tell us in the moments before he ascends to heaven? What message is so important that he spends his last precious few moments on it? The last message that he gave to the disciples can be reduced to two words, wait, and go! It’s like an advertising slogan, isn’t it? Although it’s also almost a contradiction in terms - wait and go! But both the waiting and the going were for a definite purpose. What’s more, the instructions were quite specific. Wait until power comes upon you, and go into the world to be my witnesses. Wait & Go!

Talking over a problem with someone the other day this person remarked that God’s watch always seems to be ten minutes slow! The point he was making was that sometimes we

think we can see a problem, or even a solution, faster than God seems to. Waiting can be difficult. The disciples were told to wait. We are not told if they found it irksome or frustrating, we do not know that. But we can suspect that, being human as we are, they may have had similar reactions. Perhaps they did find it difficult to wait. They had been told by Jesus that he would send a comforter. When was this comforter going to come? Would it be today? Or tomorrow? When I was expecting each of my three children, I felt as if the longest week in time was the week between the due date, and the arrival of the baby, because every morning I would wake up and think, "maybe today!" I think that is the case whatever kind of news we are waiting for. It can make the wait very stressful "Maybe today". Constantly poised for action, adrenaline pumping, maybe now, maybe this time, when? Perhaps the disciples woke up every morning with that thought in their heads. "Maybe today will be the day." Were they impatient? We don't know. But a more important question is - are we impatient? Do we find it difficult to wait on God's time? Do we find it difficult to be patient in prayer? We want answers and we want them now. We hear stories of great saints of the faith who spend years praying for something before the prayer is answered, but if I might hazard a guess, I suspect that few of us here this morning have the patience to pray for something for years while getting no apparent answer. The sad truth is that we are not particularly good at waiting. The cry of the psalmist, "How long, O Lord?" punctuates the psalms like a chorus. And I suspect that we have all experienced times when we would echo that cry.

But waiting time is God's time. Waiting is part of the plan - who are we to think that we should set the agenda. Our despair when nothing seems to be happening misses one central fact. While we are waiting, God is working. Like a gardener preparing the soil for the seeds, he is preparing things unseen so that the seed has good ground in which to take root. The time which can seem to us like wasted time, waiting, is the time when God's plans are ripening, maturing, and coming to fruit. God's time is not our time, but God's time is the right time. The right season, when everything is prepared. When we are ready.

It is important to wait, we need to wait on God's time. God's time is not our time. But that waiting doesn't need to be a passive, ineffective waiting. Our waiting on God is not a passive waiting for him to act independently of us. It is waiting in the sense of preparation. We are waiting for him to act, but in that time we can be preparing so that we will be ready when he does. Perhaps our effectiveness as Christians depends more on the quality of our waiting, than it does on the quality of our action. Have we been waiting and preparing? Or have we been waiting and wasting time. Does our effectiveness as Christians come from our achievements, or from the way we spend our waiting time? Perhaps it matters more than we realise how we use waiting time, how ready we are to accept God's timing. But when the waiting is over, when the time is right, God says Go.

Go and be witnesses. For us in the year 2016 the idea of being a witness for Jesus is perhaps a difficult one. It generally means someone who has seen something and can testify to it. We have not physically witnessed anything. We cannot say, along with John, that that which we have seen and heard we now declare to others. Yet we can still in a sense be witnesses. To use legal language, we can testify to what God means to us, to the difference that having a faith in Jesus means in our lives. In that sense we are witnesses, we have a story to tell. And God says to us - go and tell it - go and be witnesses. That most difficult of commands. How many of us relish the thought of being

witnesses, of telling others about Jesus. We are shy, we are embarrassed, we feel it is private and personal. We are scared of offending people, or of looking foolish. Yet there it is; his last command to us before he ascended into heaven. Well, if that command of Jesus concerns you, if it worries you, there's good news and there's bad news.

The good news is that we all share our faith anyway. We don't have to try. When people find out that we go to church, they watch us. They want to see if our actions match up to what we believe in. We are witnesses without knowing it.

And the bad news? The bad news is that we all share our faith anyway. We don't have to try. When people find out that we go to church, they watch us. They want to see if our actions match up to what we believe in. You know that line of Burns "wad some power the giftie gie us, to see oursels as ithers see us." Others watch, and see maybe more than we want them to see. We are all witnesses to our faith in Christ, whether we think we are or not.

But being a witness is about more than just living out our Christian lives and hoping others will notice the difference. It is about sharing our story and showing by our lives that God is real in our lives. It is about sharing our lives with one another, and with those outside the church, so that through the love and concern that we show for them, they might come to know the love and concern of God for them. It is the attractiveness of our lives, of our faith, that will draw others. Be witnesses Jesus says. Wait & Go. Show & Share. But when is the waiting over. When is God's time? When does God say "GO"?

There is a sense in which here in Campsie you have been preparing for several years. There has been movement and change, development and growth. But when I met with the nominating committee, I also had a sense of frustration. That the good progress that you were making had been interrupted by Sandra's ill-health. That many of the plans and hopes and dreams had not been fulfilled, and journeys embarked upon had been stuck because of that. And then, of course, there was the vacancy, and although much of the work of the church continued throughout that time, I have a real sense that you have been waiting. And so, I wonder, is it God's time now? Is God now saying "Go"? What does the future hold for us? What is God's will for us now? In what direction are we to go? I think as we look forward to the next few years here in Campsie, these are the questions we need to be asking. The time has come to seek God's will for mission in this place. The time has come to ask God to guide us as we look for ways to use our preparation in his service. To seek out his will for our direction. How does he want us to spread the good news? How does he want us to be witnesses? What will be the most effective way of sharing our Christian faith with our community? Is the time of waiting over? As we step forward in faith, he will guide us. Let's not be afraid to go out in his name so that others may come in to this family and discover for themselves the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.