

**Sermon preached at Jesus College, Cambridge
on Sun 20 May, the Sunday after the Ascension, 2007**

by David Wilbourne

Readings: Joshua 1; 2 Timothy 3

It's a great privilege to have been present for a world premier,
and a wonderful anthem it was too.

I'm glad we've had it, because otherwise
I would have felt immensely sorry for you,
because when I attended this Chapel in the 1970s
we used to have these ancient vicars
who'd been up in the 1940s,
who to be honest had either lost the plot entirely,
or were still raging wars and controversies
which were long since forgotten,
like those Japanese warriors they used to find
dug into the jungles of Borneo, still on battle alert,
little realising that the 2nd World War
had ended decades ago.

And in what seems just the twinkling of an eye
here am I, an ancient vicar and a student no longer!
I cannot tell you how sorry I am.
Of course being as student in the 1970s
meant I missed the heady 1960s
and the infamous summer of love -
such a fast promiscuous society,
always before us and leaving as we arrive!

The 1960s of course was also the age of student revolt

with virtually every young person
protesting about America
fighting a war far from home
which she could never win.
How things have changed!

The president, Linden Byrd Johnson
was the focus for all the ire,
with 'LBJ must go'
the protesters' catchy chant.
In 1968, the day after Johnson was ousted
by Richard Nixon's new dawn,
Punch ran a cartoon
of some perplexed students
crowded in a bedsit
surrounded by dozens of
LBJ Must Go placards.
'But he's gone!' one of them complains.

'But he's gone!'
is surely the catch phrase
for this Sunday after the Ascension,
with Christ gone up on high: JC's gone.

Our two lessons tonight mirror
the theme of going and hand-over:
Moses after ranting on for the entire of Deuteronomy,
at last has the decency to die
and hand over to Joshua.
And Paul,
the Tony Blair of the Early Church,
champion of New Judaism,

though still alive and still ranting on,
hints in one of his pastoral letters at his swan song
and handing over to Timothy,
a sort of divine version of Gordon Brown.

Ascension forces upon us the question,
how does it all end?

As endings go I suppose Ascension
is the ultimate ace of trumps,
but what will our ending be like:
life consists of lots and lots of endings
and then an ultimate ending,
but what attention do we give to them,
we who are thrilled by beginnings
but probably don't look to the end?
How about this ending
by Alan Bennett's vicar's wife
in his monologue,
Bed amongst the Lentils:

'Once upon a time I had my life planned out -
or half of it at any rate.
I wasn't clear about the first part,
but at the stroke of fifty
I was all set to turn into a wonderful woman -
the wife to a doctor, or a vicar's wife,
Chairman of the Parish Council,
pillar of the WI.
A wise, witty, ultimately white-haired old lady,
who always stood on her own feet
until one day
at the age of eighty
she comes out the County Library,

falls under the weight of her improving book,
breaks her hip
and dies peacefully,
continently and without fuss
under a snowy coverlet in the cottage hospital.
And coming away from her funeral
in a country churchyard
on a bright winter's afternoon,
people would say,
"Well, she was a wonderful woman."

I'm sorry to say it doesn't often end like that.
Nearly every death is either too soon or too late
and it's nobody's fault,
death brooks no management.
But there are little deaths,
pardon my French,
which happen throughout life,
and we do have the power to manage them,
to make them either ascensions or damp squibs.
The trick is actually thinking about
how a part of life or
a piece of work is going to end.
The short-story writer Saki, H H Munro,
has marvellous endings
which draw you into the plot -
how about this, his closing words from
The Secret Sin of Septimus Brope,
a story about a very serious church music composer
who makes his money anonymously writing pop ditties:

'A few weeks later,
in Blackpool and places where they sing,

the following refrain held undisputed sway:

"How you bore me Florrie
With those eyes of vacant blue;
You'll be very sorry, Florrie,
If I marry you.
Though I'm easy going, Florrie,
This I swear is true,
I'll throw you down a quarry, Florrie,
If I marry you."

We're good at beginnings and middles
but tend to run out of steam by the end.
I have to read a lot,
and often I prioritise what I read
by starting an article at the end
and see whether it's still got punch.
If it hasn't, then I move on to something that has.
I get the trick from God,
whose first language is Hebrew
which is a back to front,
right to left language,
with Hebrew books ending
where ours start.
I guess God likes starting at good endings,
likes Ascensions,
and reading back,
and gets a bit bored
when folk just dribble on and on and on,
life in all its tediousness without end.

Knowing when to stop, when to take your leave
is an important key.
Most people don't know how to stop.

Moses seemingly didn't,
as I say rabbiting on with his farewell for a whole book.

Jesus in his farewell speech
in John's Gospel,
goes on for over 4000 words,
which would qualify him for a Ph D at some universities.
The Last Supper
would have been a very cold supper indeed
by the time he finished.

When I was six our family moved
from the delightful cathedral city of Lichfield
to East Hull, which was not delightful.
I didn't know that at the time,
but went on and on every day at my school
about how excited I was about going to Hull.
'Yes,' my teacher said one day, in exasperation,
'We all know you're going to Hull.
to be honest, we'll be glad when you've gone.'
We don't want our endings in life to be like that,
folk saying,
'Yes, we know you're going; for goodness sake, go!'
I could almost imagine the disciples
saying that after 4000 words.

When it comes to relationships,
endings seem hard and cruel,
yet when we think about it,
such endings are part and parcel of every single day.
Babies become toddlers, who become children, who become adults.
Each day we all change,
stamina comes and goes, reason comes and goes.

The former Archbishop of York,
John Habgood,
used to talk of all gifts being given,
and being given us for just a season,
health, faculties, friendships, even life itself,
given us for a just a season.
The problems start when we won't let go,
when we try and hang on to them for ever,
and it all turns as sour as the manna
the Israelites hoarded in the wilderness.

The South African writer, Alan Paton,
wrote a poem, a very long poem,
about his son who was on the brink
of adolescence and adulthood,
Letter to a young boy Confirmed.
There's a particular line from the poem
which has stuck with me,
'Thanks be to God for this so brief possession,
so full of joy.'
That's a good bitter/sweet line to mark every ending.

And endings, a la T S Eliot, can be our beginnings.
Jesus' long farewell discourse to his friends
in John's Gospel
homes in on the fact
that his departure will be the making of them,
will enable them to take power,
to take the Spirit's power.
Jesus is a bit of a parent,
the disciples his children,
and yet at some stage the coddling and the scaffolding
has to stop

otherwise nothing will blossom, things will only be smothered.
In a real sense both being with someone
and walking away from them is the making of us.
As Cecil Day Lewis realised only too well in this poem:

It's eighteen years ago, almost to the day -
A sunny day with the leaves just turning,
The touch-lines new-ruled - since I watched you play
Your first game of football, then, like a satellite
Wrenched from its orbit, go drifting away

Behind a scatter of boys. I can see
You walking away from me towards the school
With the pathos of a half-fledged thing set free
Into a wilderness, the gait of one
Who finds no path where **the** path should be.

That hesitant figure, eddying away
Like a winged seed loosened from its parent stem,
Has something I never quite grasp to convey
About nature's give-and-take - the small, the scorching
Ordeals which fire one's irresolute clay.

I have had worse partings, but none that so
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly
Saying what God alone could perfectly show -
How selfhood begins with a walking away,
And love is proved in the letting go.

LBJ must go.
JC must go.
Goodness, is that the time? I must go! Amen.