

Final Sermon from Richard Cowles on 10th September 2017

A man was out walking by himself in the high mountains. He came to the edge of a precipice and went to look at the view. Suddenly his feet slipped from under him and he was falling. As he was going over the edge he reached out and grabbed onto a small tree that was growing out of the cliff face. Dangling by one arm he looked down – it was a sheer drop of hundreds of feet. ‘Help,’ he shouted. ‘Is anybody there?’ To his astonishment, for he had seen no-one else all day, a voice spoke: ‘Yes, it is I.’ ‘Who are you?’ said the man. ‘I am God’ replied the voice. ‘Help me God’, said the man. ‘Very well my son’, said God. ‘Just let go of the tree you are holding on to, allow yourself to fall and I will catch you safely.’

‘Is there anybody else there?’

Letting go is not easy. It is not easy for any of us to accept a change in our situations when we are not certain what the future will hold. People who have had to abdicate from positions of power often find it very difficult to accept that they are in charge no longer.

Mrs Thatcher, for example, made John Major’s life very uncomfortable after he had succeeded her as PM: she found it difficult to release her grip on power.

It’s not only politicians who suffer from this inability. When Michael Ramsey succeeded Geoffrey Fisher as Archbishop of Canterbury, he was perturbed to receive a series of letters from the retired primate, criticising him and proffering uncalled for and unwanted advice.

As a humble parish priest I’m not in the same class as PMs and Archbishops, but I do understand that letting go of what has been your life for many years cannot be easy. I now have to do the same – I have to let go. Despite all the ties that bind me to you here, I have to tell you that I shan’t be popping back frequently to St Michael’s: not because I wouldn’t love to see you, but because it would not be fair to the man or woman who succeeds me as Vicar. And you will have to understand this and let me go too.

And there may be more letting go for you to do in the future. I’m certainly no prophet, but I can tell you that the new Vicar will not be a clone of me. He or she will have new ideas, and will have different ways of doing things. There will necessarily be change. We may need to let some things go.

But change is not a bad thing. Churches sometime have a negative attitude to it and I reckon it is all the fault of the hymn ‘Abide with me.’ Why so? Because one of the lines goes, ‘Change and decay in all around I see.’! Those words have planted in our minds the impression that change is a bad thing, that it entails decay, rot, falling apart. But change doesn’t have to mean that. In a recent sermon preached here, Canon John White reminded us of the words of John Henry Newman, Cardinal Newman, who said ‘In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to change often is to become perfect.’ Our present life in this world is necessarily marked by change. And the fact that living things change is indeed a sign of their life, that they are alive. ‘To live is to change.’

So we shall all need to change, and let go, and do so with confidence and trust in God's good purposes for us.

I do have confidence in the future for you, for St Michael's, and for the parishes of Bray with Braywood. I wouldn't want to be so presumptuous as to compare myself with the Lord Jesus, but I recall that he did once say to his disciples, 'it is good for you that I go away.' I do believe that I am leaving at the right time and that good will come out of this parting. That will come about if you continue to work together as a team, pull in the same direction as you always have done, and support our two church wardens, who have a great responsibility on their shoulders during the interregnum.

When I was installed as vicar the church wardens presented me with the keys to the church. Today I hand them back, together with the responsibility for the church.

Some of the best people I have ever known have been the churchwardens that I have worked with both in my previous parishes and here. In my time at St Michael's I have been fortunate to have collaborated with marvellous people, every single one of them, and I thank them sincerely. Now I ask you to continue to support our two wardens – we are fortunate to have such dedicated and caring people and I thank them personally for all the support, help and encouragement that they have given me over the years.

I didn't choose special readings for today's service – simply those set for this particular Sunday in the church year, but it seems to me that there are good things to hold on to and not let go. Paul's words 'Owe no one anything except to love one another...love is the fulfilling of the law' reminds us of the centrality of love in the Christian gospel.

Jesus' words in the gospel 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them' contain the promise of his presence with us whenever we meet to worship in his name. Today there are some two hundred of us, but I imagine that on some Sundays to come the attendance will not be so great! However, the risen Christ will be here amongst us nonetheless, whether its hundreds or just two or three.

And so we can let go in confidence and trust in God's good purposes for us. Let go in the calm faith that always and at every time God is there to catch us when we fall, for 'underneath are the everlasting arms'.

Please pray for me and pray also that God may give us all grace to let go and to embrace what the future may bring with quiet confidence and trust.

Amen.