

9th August 2026

Farewell Service

Dursley Tabernacle

Call to Worship

Good morning everybody. It is deeply moving to see so many of you here, gathered from Dursley, Rodborough and the Quarry to say goodbye to me and my family. We have much to give thanks for and to celebrate with you. But we come to worship God who unites us in Christ and empowers us in the Spirit.

Ministers come, Ministers go, but we rejoice because God is always there.

For His perfect love will never change,
And His mercies never cease,
But follow us through all our days
With the certain hope of peace.

Opening Prayer

"God of our beginnings and our endings, we thank you for always being there. We thank you for calling us into a relationship with you, our Creator and for the invitation to share life's journey and walk together.

You came to us in Jesus to show us your compassion and companionship. Even though he went to the cross crucified by our sin, you kept on loving us and offering us a forgiveness that not even death could end.

Through the resurrection you call us to a new life and a new hope, empowering us by your Holy Spirit. May your presence guide our steps, may your love be a constant shelter, and may we feel in our hearts that you are holding us close wherever we go.

"Lord of New Beginnings,

As we stand at the threshold of change in our church community we ask for Your clear vision and steady courage. For the those of us stepping into a new ministry: grant wisdom, a compassionate heart, and strength for the days ahead. For the congregations remaining and welcoming new leadership: grant open minds, patience, and a unified spirit. Help us all to remember that buildings change, seasons turn, and leaders come and go, but Your love remains constant. Renew our passion to serve You in this new season.

In Your holy name, Amen."

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5.12-28

Final Sermon

25 years and you are finally getting rid of me. We will be sad to be leaving you. This has been a wonderful time and you have been wonderful people.

I wasn't looking to leave – I thought I would see out my days here until I retired but when the United Reformed Church asked me to consider taking on one final challenge, a church in Ilkley, I felt I needed to be open to the possibility. Ilkley seems to have some wonderful people too, even though it is in Yorkshire. So we leave in a couple of days for a new adventure.

This has been a great adventure. And these four, Debbie, Jo Libby and Sam have shared it with me all this time and I want to say thank you to them for putting up with a father who is a church minister. You have been on public show all that time and you have carried yourself with good grace.

Initially we lived on the back of the church in the Parsonage. It was an imposing building, which the kids loved – they used to say it was like the Tardis, it was a house with a church in it. There was a connecting door from the house to the church vestry and into the church. A bit unfortunate once on a Christmas Day, Debbie had just got out of the shower, which was opposite the connecting door, as the church secretary, Vic Watts burst in asking for the hymn numbers. I think she made his Christmas. He didn't hers.

When we looked round the house it was falling apart. We asked for a new kitchen to be put in and the two Ronnies, Ron Heathman and Ron Jones, our Fabirc Stewards, oversaw it.

Rats used to wander freely through our gardens, feeding on all loose rubbish that folk would throw in there on their way out of town late at night. The rats were so bad we told the kids they were called squirrels. Because they constantly spotted them and told visitors about them. 'We saw two squirrels in our garden yesterday'.

Connected to the church we did have lots of play space to run around in. Confession time: we once played golf in the church back in the time when it was full of pews. It was Hogmanay New Year and Shirley and Matt Weslh had come over to teach us Scottish Country dancing. We then had a game of golf throughout the whole church. Teeing off the top of the pulpit was the highlight.

Being so evident that we were the holy family living next to the church did mean we never got a visit from the Jehovah's Witnesses. But we did get beggars and gentlemen of the road. One such asked me for money so he could travel to Glasgow to go to his grandmother's funeral. I wasn't buying it for a moment. I said tell me the truth and I will help you. He said that is the truth. We had a stand-off for a few minutes. So, I said I tell you what I will take you to Gloucester pay for a coach ticket to Glasgow for you. So we went all the way to Gloucester, me sharing the gospel with him in the car as a captive

audience. We got to Gloucester; I was still asking him whether this was true he wanted to go Glasgow for his grandmother's funeral – oh yes - I bought him a ticket for the coach. I waited with him until the coach came and saw him on it. He gave me a friendly wave as the coach set off on its ten-hour journey.

The first day we arrived at the Parsonage Peggy Trezise turned up with a cooked meal. As she handed over the casserole she said, 'I won't come in because I'm radioactive!' Not quite sure how to respond to that and whether the casserole was safe to eat – but we did. Apparently, Peggy had been having some treatment that had exposed her to radiation and she had to keep her distance.

Well, its felt radioactive ever since. God has been at work and it's been a blessing. A spiritual blessing – radioactive.

All through that time Debbie Jo Libby and Sam have kept my feet on the ground and punctured any pretence I may have had.

I remember when I was describing my first experience of speaking in tongues. I said I was sceptical of this so-called spiritual gift. I thought people made it up to feel super spiritual. But as a community worker for a church in Nottingham I visited an old lady who was crippled with arthritis. She said she was in so much pain that she cried out to God in prayer, but her prayer was all gobbledy gook. It didn't make sense. But at the end of it she felt a deep peace and close connection to God. I read her some words from Paul's letter to the Corinthians where he describes the phenomena of praying in the spirit and she said that is what happened to her.

But when I started the story I said, 'my first experience of tongues was with an old lady'.

These three adolescents just burst out laughing and then ribbed me mercilessly for the rest of the day.

We have had many laughs and there are many stories.

I shared some highlights back in January when we celebrated my 25th anniversary here. They are all on record so I won't repeat them again. I didn't share some wedding stories then. I remember the bride who was an hour and a quarter late. The guests had gone off for a drink at the Old Spot we had to drag them back. Simon Fullard had gone through the entire hymn book on the organ. We had a wedding of the bride who arrived on horseback. The wedding of the couple who left on a tractor. Then there was the wedding of Aimee and Lloyd and their photographer, who wouldn't get out of the way and so I stopped the service until she stood down. Then there was Liz and Gray getting married within a Sunday morning service. Ron popping the question to Liz during the notices on a Sunday morning. Me making a gaffe at Will's baptism when Rod's sister Amanda and her partner Ian came up to read a prayer and I introduced him as Amanda's fiancée and he said but I haven't asked her to marry me – well get on with it Ian.

Listen I have got enough material for a few stand up comedy evenings. Thankyou. Its been a privilege and an honour to preside at your most important family moments, baptisms, weddings and funerals.

And you have indulged me in letting me share my football stories – although I can see whose eyes roll when I mention Burnely Football Club. When I first arrived, we had just been promoted to the Championship and in time would get promoted to the Premiership and then yo yo back and forth since. I am grateful to those members who have shared their Sky subscription with me– Bill Stutes, Malcolm Harris, Mike Pricthard, Vic Watts – Debbie I behaved myself and didn't swear when I was watching the football with church members.

It was purely coincidental that the church was refurbished in the colours of my football team – Caret and Blue. And it is a malicious gossip to suggest that I'm only moving to Jllkley because it's close to Turf Moor.

But moving I am - so what do I want to say to you as I leave.

St Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians gives them some final instructions at the end of his letter. I thought I would leave you with some thoughts based on this chapter.

Paul deals with three essential aspects of the local church's life.

First, he addresses himself to the leadership and tells how ministers and people should regard and relate to each other. Ministers shouldn't dominate and organise everything. They are not meant to monopolise ministries but rather to multiply them. Forgive me when I have been too controlling and haven't delegated. But I also know it has been a joy to have worked alongside so many dedicated and talented individuals. And I have every confidence in you all taking forward the work of these three churches.

I was going to give you a bracelet at the end of the service but they haven't arrived yet from America. They have the initials WWSD on it. What Would Simon Do?

I think it's only appropriate after all these glowing tributes and moving testimonies that once Ive gone you should always have at the forefront of your mind what would Simon do in this situation. What would Simon 's advice be for this particular dilemma. What would Simon want to see happen?

Of course it doesn't say WWSD. It says WWJD. What Would Jesus Do?

I am no saint. God forbid you do what I want you to do. Because I don't trust myself. I trust the Lord and I want to follow him.

All this guff you hear in popular culture: 'just do it, be free, just be yourself' - well listen if I'm myself, I could be a right selfish so and so. I could be quite opinionated and judgemental. I could be quite lethargic and not bothered about others. If I'm just being myself.

I know I am a product of so many different influences. My parents, my background and upbringing, my friends, the media my education. I am well aware that a lot of those influences are not godly influences but very worldly influences. Worldly values and attitudes.

I was brought up in a working-class environment that was at times sexist, racist, homophobic and placed value on things like money, strength and power. That is the spirit of the world. It leads to competition, divisiveness, fear, domination and oppression. It is not the way of the kingdom of God. It is not the way for Jesus.

What would Simon Do is not necessarily what Jesus would do.

Dr Michael Symes always had a reverent humility in his Christianity, always addressing his prayers 'Dear Lord and Father of mankind forgive our foolish ways'.

In Christian leadership and ministry hopefully, you try and do what you believe Jesus would do. But of course, that is always open to interpretation.

You're all here because you have largely gone along with me or at least given me the benefit of the doubt. But in 25 years of ministry, I well know the ones who disagreed with me and thought I wasn't doing what Jesus would do.

Leadership is always contested and open to opinions and assessment.

What attitude should the local congregation adopt towards its ministers. They are neither to despise them, as if they are dispensable, nor to flatter them or fawn on them, but rather to respect and love them.

Your next minister will not be Simon Helme. They will be different and hopefully bring something different to your life. Try and forget about me. What would Jesus do - not - What would Simon Do.

There have been a number of times when I thought about leaving. Ministers often leave after a major conflict, and we have had our fair share of conflicts. But that is understandable when you are trying to make a difference and stir things up. Some people find change difficult. I know that working through conflicts defines a leader. How do they handle people who disagree with them. How do they seek consensus and move a community forward. How do they cope when they are being scrutinised and challenged?

Many ministers leave. That can often be the easiest option. I've hung in for 25 years.

When I spoke to my pastoral supervisor a few years ago as to when I should leave the pastorate he said you should have thought about that ten years ago. It becomes hard for someone to follow you if you have been in post for more than ten years. I hope you will love and respect your next minister.

Closing Sharpness was a painful time. Closing any church always feel like a defeat. I was sad for the faithful people who had tried everything down there to turn things around.

We nearly closed the Quarry Chapel but a minor miracle happened there – she is called Abi Nicol and God used Abi and the Spirit blew through that place bringing new heart and hope as the chapel found a new purpose in the community of Cam Woodfields. A church of, then six members, finding over £90K to refurbish the chapel is an extraordinary and inspiring story. When we reopened it in July 2023, I prayed it would be a place of welcome and wonder, creativity and compassion, hospitality and hope. God is faithful.

Then the Synod gave me Rodborough to look after and that was like starting again, a new challenge and a lovely bunch of people who I have really enjoyed working with these last four years. They love their church and love their Lord and through the work of Kim and the elders and the membership they have pulled together and feel hopeful for the future and offer an inclusive welcome to the folk of Rodborough.

Because church is not so much about the buildings, although I have spent all my 25 years here doing building projects. Important though they are it's the people that is the church and their testimonies, their fellowship, their work and witness that is the story worth telling. Ultimately it is about Jesus and how folk want to follow Jesus and do stuff in His Name.

So secondly, Paul writes about the church's fellowship. He wants them to live in peace, verse 13. He wants them to have responsibilities to care for each other, to give appropriate support, encouragement and admonition to ensure all are following the way of Jesus. The local church is to be a community not only of mutual comfort and encouragement but also of mutual forbearance and service.

I shared with Rodborough and the Quarry last week at how at my ordination as a minister 31 years ago, the preacher, my old Sunday School teacher, said you have to love these people in the church. You don't have to like them. But you do have to love them. It has been a wonderful time of getting to know you and loving you in all your diversity and personalities and even liking you – how's that!

We are all different and that can lead to people clashing and falling out. One of the precious things that came out of the Covid pandemic for me was learning about the enneagram. I had always thought it was occultic or Catholic or both – but actually it is a

profound spiritual tool for understanding personality types and growing in self awareness and understanding of how others may be different from you.

Hopefully that fosters compassion and growth and a deep appreciation of the diversity in God's world.

I found I was a number 9

Let me read this description of a number nine

Type Nine: The Peacemaker

- “Pleasant, laid back and accommodating, they are motivated by a need to keep the peace, merge with others and avoid conflict.”
- Root sin: sloth
- “For nines, sloth refers not to physical but to spiritual laziness. Nines fall asleep to their own priorities, personal development and responsibility for becoming their own person.”
- Root motivation is: the need for peace
- Healthy and mature: Chill, calming to be around, wise. Makes everyone feel understood. A leader of peace.
- Unhealthy and immature Nines: Passive aggressive. Avoids conflict at all costs. Lazy. Distracted.

The enneagram acts like a mirror that you hold up to yourself. You can see the good and the not so good; the mature and the immature. Hopefully it is a tool to help you be the best version of yourself and to be aware of slipping into the immature and destructive version of yourself.

For working with others, for building community, for resolving conflicts, for love and understanding it has made the last few years of my ministry enjoyable and just makes me smile when I encounter you all in your various roles and guises. We had someone come and do an Enneagram workshop a couple of years back. I hope you'll do it again and be brave enough to look at yourself. If you are serious about spiritual growth in Christ it can be very useful.

Thirdly, Paul comes to the church's public worship and lays down four essential ingredients. Whenever God's people meet for worship and whatever their feelings and circumstances, there should be rejoicing in Christ, praying to God and giving thanks to God for God's faithfulness and mercies, alongside listening to God's word read, expounded and applied.

I know we have had worship wars in the past. Different styles of worship, different music. I know twenty something years ago I was this church's worst nightmare – a church minister who turned up one Sunday with a guitar, three cords and the truth. It was as though lemon slices were passed out to the whole congregation to suck on. The late great Joan Kingham MBE came to my rescue, as she often did in those early years, by saying in a fiery church meeting that this modern music may not bless you but it will bless someone else and we should reach out to all generations and tastes. Our worship is what we offer to God primarily, and not necessarily what we get out of it.

Don't quench the Spirit. The great Comforter -or is that the great Disturber – the one who brings life and freshness, who blows through like the wind sometimes unsettling and everything is in the air – is Jesus' spiritual presence and help to us. Be open to the Spirit. Don't quench the Spirit.

So Paul addresses three essential aspects of the local church's life: the leadership, the fellowship and the worship of the church.

In this age of loneliness and disconnection the church can be the great antidote to feelings of isolation and despair. And together we can make a difference and do great things.

I remember how Joan Kingham was inspired by the motto of the great missionary William Carey:

'Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.'

Joan Kingham never wasted an opportunity to urge people to follow Jesus, to join his church, to be taken up in his service. I sat in on her interview with Bill Turnbull for Songs of Praise. In the middle of their conversation she asked him 'did he know the Lord and did he go to church?' He said he did, a little embarrassed and confused because he thought he was doing the interviewing. 'Good boy' she said. Needless to say, that bit was edited out of the final cut.

Joan cared for those who did not experience fulness of life. She would collect come wind and rain for Christian Aid or Amnesty. She put her heart and soul into work for Corrymeela and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, Open Door, Dursley Day Centre.

I've sat with her as she has cried for those who have been suffering and grieved deeply for those who have become estranged from family members, aggrieved by the church, hurt and angry with others. She hated people falling out and at enmity with each other.

I do too. And I hope I've tried to do my bit to help others experience the fulness of life in Christ.

Paul urges us: *Live in peace with each other. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.*

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Paul ends his letter as he will end all his subsequent letters, signing off on the note of grace. Grace will win at last. All Pauls letters begin and end with grace but there is an interesting variation. The blessings at the beginning of the letters say, 'Grace to you'. But the blessings at the end always say 'grace be with you'

It is as if at the beginning of the letter Paul has in mind that the letter itself is a channel of God's grace to the readers. By the end of the letter Grace be with you. With you as you put the letter away and leave the church. With you as you go home to deal with a sick relative or an unaffectionate partner. With you as you go to work. With you as you face temptation of anger, dishonesty and lust. With you as you muster up the courage to share your faith with a friend or colleague.

Grace never fails. All good things come to an end. Ministers come; ministers go. But one good thing that never comes to an end is God. God's grace never fails. God's faithfulness is new every morning. It will all turn out right in the end.

I have done over a hundred funerals of members in this church alone. Their faith has been inspirational. I remember Kathryn Palmer saying she was aware of being held by God during these times of real difficulty. That she wasn't afraid – in fact she was even getting excited about not being here, about 'going home', as she described dying - because she was sure of the promises of God to her because of what Jesus had done, by dying for us and being raised to life for us. Her every need had been met. She did not want for nothing. She felt peaceful.

She said 'You can't earn it; you don't deserve it – it's all grace'.

Grace is the gift of God's love to us. 'You can't earn it, you don't deserve it – it's all grace'.

Amazing Grace. A wondrous story. A glorious gospel of good news.

That behind all things is a Creator – we are not alone. We are loved and accepted. We know this through Jesus, who showed us the love of God. God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life -they had those words from John 3.16 painted in bold letters at the front of the church in Sharpness.

There is no need to judge. No need to put others down. No need to fight and compete. Grace. All is grace.

When people complain to us for using the Food Hub -they don't deserve it – they shouldn't be taking food – be gracious – one day you may be in need.

We don't believe in karma. Thank God we don't get what we deserve. Though many try to prove themselves and many are full of their own pride and achievements.

It's all grace.

And I've been so blessed to have known the grace of God in my own life and to have had the opportunity to share the grace of God

My mum bought me a bible when I was a twenty year old. In it she wrote this

One life to live will soon be passed. But to live for Christ will always last'

Paul in this passage says *'And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone'*.

It literally means those who are timid and fainthearted. They are literally small souled. The great Congregational theologian P T Forsyth, one of my heroes, called for soul greatness. This is the opposite where our capacity for faith and hope is diminished, has shrivelled or is underdeveloped. It's the result of feeding on trivialities, titbits. No soul will grow big in God if it seeks to exist on spiritual junk food.

To expand and grow the soul, to have soul greatness, we need to absorb the big themes and the great truths of our faith. To feed on the majestic facts of God's holiness, love and grace, the incarnation of the Son of God, and the victory of the cross and resurrection and embrace the soul stretching vision of Christ coming again in glory , the hope of new earth and a new heaven – of justice and peace at the last.

Following Jesus Christ is life's greatest adventure. What Would Jesus Do? Can you seek the lost. Can you love your enemy? Can you give to those in need, seek reconciliation with those who are estranged, pursue justice for those who have been wronged.

Where there is doubt, can you bring faith.

Where there is despair, can you bring hope.

Where there is darkness, can you bring the light of Christ.

Where there is sadness, can you bring joy.

When you are part of Christ's work through the church you have an eternal perspective. Don't settle for a trivial life. FOLLOW JESUS!

'One life to live will soon be passed. But to live for Christ will always last'

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Praying our Farewells

(Leader): God is our beginnings and endings.

We celebrate all we have shared with (Name & name)

We ask your blessing as they let go of their roles here
and continue on the journey, serving you in new ways.

Words from the psalms:

You O God, will guard us from all evil: you will protect our lives.

You will protect our going out and coming in: both now and forever.

Where can I flee from your Spirit? or where can I flee from your presence?

If I climb to heaven, you are there: if I lie in the grave, you are there also.

If I take the wings of the morning: and dwell in the depths of the sea.

Even there, your hand shall lead me: your hand shall hold me fast.

All –

As you journey on,

we give thanks for you and all you have given us.

We ask forgiveness where we have failed you.

We assure you of our love and prayers.

(Name)

As I let go of my role here as (your Minister etc),

I give thanks for you and all you have given to me.

I ask forgiveness where I have failed you.

I assure you of my love and prayers.

All –

As you experience the pain of change

and the insecurity of moving on,

we pray that you may also experience

the blessing of new growth.

Name: I know that God goes with me/ We know that God goes with us

All - As you meet the poor, the pained

and the stranger in the Way

we pray that you may see in each one the face of Christ.

Name: I know that God goes with me/ We know that God goes with us

All - As you walk through the good times and the bad

we pray that you may never lose sight

of the shelter of God's loving arms.

Name: I know that God goes with me/ We know that God goes with us

All - As you ponder over your decisions

and wonder at the fruits of your choices

we pray the peace of Christ may reign in your heart.

Name: I know that God goes with me/ We know that God goes with us

Leader:

We praise and thank you, God of the journey,

for both Name & Name who are soon to leave us.

We entrust them into your loving care,

knowing that you are always

the faithful traveller and companion on the Way.

Shelter and protect them from all harm and anxiety,

grant them the courage to meet the future,

and grace to let go into new life.

Through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

Blessing

Its been a blast. Thankyou.

God be with you. ITS ALL GRACE.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, The love of God, And the fellowship of the Holy spirit

Be with us all now and evermore. Amen