Portraits of St. Paul: A farewell message

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Three hours from the time I write these words the Jubilee Year of St. Paul will officially end. We might wonder what parting thoughts Paul would have for us as individuals and as church at the close of his Jubilee Year, which of his many words of inspiration he would write in bold letters on our hearts.

“We who are many are one body” (Romans 12:5)
Like his Master before him, Paul would pray that we get our act together and “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). He would ask us to break open our blocked caves and find each other. He would warn us that conviction can dull perception, so we might easily fail to see not only the other person’s point of view but the other person. Isn’t that why he likened the church to the human body, all the members of which need each other. “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). He would remind us that, like Christ’s body, this body, the church, is a broken body, fragile, to be handled with care. Nothing less will heal the anguished spirit or release the heart to act in love.

“Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5)
Our eyes should see things, therefore, through the eyes of Christ. They will then see with love that wants to serve the other and help people to become truly themselves. Paul asked the struggling church at Philippi to make their own the mind of Christ Jesus and to “be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Philippians 2:2). “Being of the same mind” has less to do with orthodoxy, uniformity or, heaven forbid, conformity than with the attitude we ought to have towards each other: mutual respect, willingness to listen to each other, readiness to serve one another. In the end, we will behave according to the way we think of Christ who humbled himself, set aside his privileges, forfeited his rights, showed himself in the form of a slave, literally putting himself out for the sake of others. By thus thinking and acting we not only “build up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12), we respond to Paul’s plea to make his “joy complete” (Philippians 2:2).

“Encouragement in Christ” (Philippians 2:1)
Paul’s farewell message to the Christian community at Ephesus before he left for Macedonia was one of encouragement (Acts 20:1). Fourteen times in his letters he speaks of the need for encouragement. He sees Christ as the one who encourages (Philippians 2:1). The Scriptures, he claims, were written not only for our instruction, but “for our encouragement… that we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). Indeed, in the same verse, he calls on “the God of encouragement” to grant the community in Rome to “live in harmony with one another.” Small wonder, then, that Paul’s first instinct is to encourage people and that his primary concern is for the faint-hearted. To encourage, after all, is to give someone heart. If, as W.B.Yeats observes, “too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart,” too much grief can break it. Maybe one of the most important lessons we have to learn from Paul is the need for tenderness. Several decades ago Heinrich Böll lodged this complaint: “What has been lacking to date in Christian preaching from all quarters has been tenderness, verbal, human, and, yes, theological tenderness.” I am sure Paul would agree with him. It is up to us, is it not, to replace the cold eye with the warm heart?

“Take me as your pattern, just as I take Christ for mine” (1 Corinthians 11:1)
We have a great exemplar in Paul himself. When he writes about his activity as a missionary he uses the language of the nursery, not of the battlefield. He views his relationship with his churches primarily in terms drawn from family life, as the “mother” who bore them, as the “nurse” who cared for them, or as the “father” who encouraged them (Gal. 4:19; 1 Thess. 2:7; 1 Thess. 2:11). He tells the Corinthians: “We do not lord it over your faith; we work with you for your joy” (2 Cor. 1:24). Like Jesus, Paul respected people’s freedom. Like Jesus he took people just where he found them and encouraged them to develop their own sense of spiritual maturity, rather than imposing on them a ready-made framework set in stone. Paul is still tugging at the sleeves of our church pleading with us to allow ourselves that open-ended flexibility and freedom which both he and Jesus, whose heart he knew so well, placed at the centre of the gospel. For this to happen, much serious thought and honest dialogue are called for together with perseverance in prayer.