

## FAMOUS LAST WORDS: KEEP THE FAITH

I shall never forget hearing a Church Treasurer let off considerable steam on the subject of legacies. Don't get me wrong, he was truly grateful to people who remembered the church in their will but he had had some trouble with those who had been quite specific as to what their money was to be used for. On this particular occasion, someone had left his church a legacy which, the will decreed, was to be used to buy a mini-bus.

*A mini-bus! He shouted. We don't want a \*\* mini-bus. We have not got the money to run a mini-bus. We have not got anywhere to keep it. There is no-one to look after it. And we don't need a mini-bus. We have our transport perfectly well sorted here.*  
In short, he was not pleased.

I remember a small town where there was an evangelical church situated in a prime position on the High Street. This site had been left as a gift to the congregation about a hundred years ago. It was a very generous gift but it came with a clause- that this church was to have no dealings with the Roman Catholic Church. Ever. So when, in the nineteen-eighties, the other local churches formed a covenant to share their Christian mission, this church could not join because Roman Catholics were involved.

When you love someone, then naturally you want to leave them a gift and, in love, you may want to leave some advice on how to use that gift to bring them happiness. But when you try to exercise iron control over the other person, whether in death or in life, this is not about love. It is about power. You may appear to be leaving a gift whereas in fact you are fastening on handcuffs.

Of course this works both ways. Those who are left can use the memory of a parent or a King or a previous minister to exercise their own power:

*"The great King would never have made peace with that country. He would have fought to the last man."*

*"Dear Reverend Archangel always preached from the King James' version of the Bible so we can't possibly use "Today's New International Version."*

Remember Del-boy in "Only Fools and Horses" who, whenever he wanted to coerce his brother into doing something, would insist that "Mum," on her death-bed, had left specific instructions to this effect. If that poor lady had really said everything Del insisted she had, then she must have been on her death bed for at least six months, with a round-the-clock team of solicitors writing out her will.

You can say that you are cherishing love, when in fact what you are cherishing is power. In the prayer St John recorded, Jesus is expressing something of his anxiety for the friends he is leaving and for those they will influence in the future. He knows that his time is running short and that despite all that he has taught his friends, human nature is frail and fallible. Will they keep the faith, the true faith?

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St John was Jesus' closest friend. He knew him better than anyone else and so had a far deeper understanding of what was going on in his mind. John lived to a great age, so he had time, which few of the other disciples had, time to grow in faith and to reflect deeply on what Jesus had said and done. His Gospel has a depth and a maturity





Many years ago I was involved as a student with a church in a seaside town in Wales. The building was large and majestic-looking and it stood directly opposite another, equally large, majestic-looking building owned by the Methodist Church. I heard a lot of stories about those two churches in their “heyday.” There was a lot of power about; the people with the money ran the church; the people who exercised local authority expected to have things their way in the church. You had to have considerable social and standing in the church to be allowed to pour out the tea. (So I hope that whoever is making the coffee this morning feels really good about themselves...) There was little love or compassion shown to those who needed it.

As church-going declined after the nineteen sixties (and neither congregation was good at making newcomers welcome, anyway) conversations were started about the possibility of uniting the two churches under one roof. A long period of consultation took place until finally the Minister believed that the Church Meeting was ready to vote. It was a sad Church Meeting- sad, in the widest sense of the word, as in “pathetic.” A few militant people who were determined not to lose their grand, majestic building and their personal power in the church brought to the meeting every member they could find, many of whom had not been in church for years, and persuaded them to vote against the plans. It was not about love, it was not about showing the reality of God. It was about power.

The Minister resigned in despair, the Church secretary resigned in fury and the life of both congregations continued to decline steadily for another thirty years and more. But earlier this week I spoke to the current minister and, do you know what? Both congregations are selling their buildings and having a new United Christian church built on the sea-front. New life is happening at last and do you know why? Because the power in the church has gone. There is no money to speak of, there are no prominent political citizens to use their church as an extension of their social power, pouring out the tea is done in a spirit of comradeship rather than competition and God, the true God, the God of love, finally has a chance to get his foot in the door.

*Holy Father, protect my people. Help them to keep the faith.*

As Jesus, in love, relinquished all his power when he hung on the cross and so revealed the ultimate reality of God so, when the people of God, in love, are ready to relinquish their power, then and only then will Jesus’ prayer be answered. We shall keep the faith and show the glory of God to the world.

Amen.