

*Fr Andrew Fenby*

Here we are then. Almost at the end of another year. Scant minutes away from the annual re-enactment of the battle of Waterloo. The sand has almost run out of the top of the glass, almost nothing now left to drop. Whatever we are going to say now we want to make it count. Because last words are important. There's never going to be an opportunity again this decade; this is our last chance to impress.

It is, though, difficult to know what to say. Put on the spot we *might* say something meaningful, we might inadvertently let slip some wisdom. Equally likely, we might be unaware that the last grain of sand is falling to the bottom of the timer and be caught saying something banal. We might find ourselves overcome by inadequacy, tongue-tied with self-consciousness, wary of repeating ourselves, horrified at the idea of saying something trite. I don't know. Perhaps it's best not to overthink things, perhaps it's best to simply say it, easiest just to open your mouth and see what comes out. Usually something does. And what do you know; sometimes it *is* meaningful or wise, sometimes it *is* banal or trite, sometimes it's fantastic, sometimes functional. But usually it doesn't matter, because it won't be long before we say the next thing, words that clarify the stupid thing you just thought we said, words that move the conversation on, words that charm after the insult or soothe after the hurt. What we say matters of course, but there's always plenty more where those words came from. Communication is cheap, words flow out in an endless stream, meaningless, meaningful; an infinite flood of dialogue and monologue. In the beginning was the Word, and we haven't stopped talking ever since.

Time will come though when the spate will stop, when the words that emerge from our mouth will be swiftly followed by our last breath. Then, if there's anyone there to listen, they'll be paying particular attention to what we're saying, because our last words are ones those who survive us and remember us freight with particular significance. After all, what now have we got to lose? Barely left in this world, departing for the next, our last words have always been considered to be perceptive and insightful, our last chance to impart something of import to those gathered round us. Stripped of the need to impress or dissemble, devoid of frippery and the superfluous our final speech will be honest and bare, weighty and important. Time to leave our final mark, and cement our life's legacy.

That's the theory anyway. Nobody told William Pitt the Younger, Britain's youngest ever prime minister who *could* be remembered for his fine administrative mind, his guiding of his country through the insurrectionary fervour that threatened it following the turmoil of the French Revolution. He could be remembered for

presiding over the union of Great Britain and Ireland and thus the creation of the United Kingdom that we still, just about, live in today. Alas, however, for all his achievements, he banana-skinned at the last jump, as this great statesman's final blast was:

"I think I could eat one of Bellamy's veal pies."

More enigmatic though was the next century's greatest statesman Otto von Bismarck: the Iron Chancellor, architect of German Union and supreme master of Realpolitik, the colossus who dominated the European theatre for half a century. This arch-diplomat managed to leave the world's stage with a whimper and the word 'House.' Who knows? Perhaps for him it was all one big game of Bingo and his number finally came up? Vladimir Lenin, Russian Revolutionary, and Marxist Ideologue left us, not in the midst of a stirring speech urging the proletariat to rise against the running dogs of capitalism but praising his pet pooch who'd brought him a dead bird: 'Good dog' said the scourge of imperialism before he was packed off to the taxidermists and his ice-box limbo in Red Square.

More heartening, I think, the words of a less famous statesman President George Bush (the first one) who expired after having told his son George W 'I love you too'. Perhaps love, as Solomon famously sung, is stronger than death. The deathbed utterance of Queen Victoria, forty years after the death of her husband Albert was his familiar name: 'Bertie'. Heartbreakingly romantic; unlike the last words of her Grandson, King George the 5th who conspired to leave this world with the words 'God damn you' having just left his lips.

Occasionally people say what they probably wanted to say: Oscar Wilde never said much of what he's supposed to have, but he might have left the world saying 'either that wallpaper goes or I do'. Bob Hope, a much lesser wit, definitely packed up his irons with his best joke of all: as his wife asked him where he wanted to be buried he replied 'Surprise me'.

From the ridiculous to the sublime, and the most famous of all last words, which are without doubt those of Jesus our Saviour, spoken from the Cross.

For us, here tonight, they are not the final utterances of the most famous person in human history, though they surely are. For us, they are the words of God-made-flesh, the wood of the cross made wisdom; they are a microcosm of Jesus' teaching and a crystallisation of our faith.

*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*

Even as the nails are hammered in, Jesus prays for those who are murdering him. He doesn't demand vengeance, doesn't ask God for retribution; instead for forgiveness.

*Today you will be with me in paradise.*

Spoken to the thief being crucified next to him, these words speak to us all: the promise of forgiveness; redemption for all, no matter what we have done in our lives or how they end; the promise that Jesus is with us in our darkest hours.

*I thirst.*

Confirmation of Jesus' humanity, proof of the incarnation, surety that God in Jesus has fully entered into the human nature. He truly knows our pains and agonies, the aching hollows in our souls.

*Woman your son. Man, your mother.*

Though his personal agony is almost overwhelming, Jesus' thoughts turn to others: to his mother who has been in his story from the beginning; to the disciple whom he loved.

*My God, my God why have you forsaken me.*

The desolation of approaching death pierced Jesus's soul just as the spear would pierce his heart.

*Father into your hands, I commend my spirit.*

At the last flicker of life's light, Jesus lays all in his Father's hands.

*It is finished.*

Human life blinks out, and Jesus knows he has accomplished all he was sent to do.

Tonight a year is ending. A new decade is beginning. We cannot plan our last words, decide what we're going to say when our number is called. And anyway, there are many more New Years that will come before we leave this world for the last time.

Although the years circle round one after the other, we do not go round and round from beginning to end from end to beginning ceaselessly circling. Those circling years are like the wheels of car; as they go round and round they move us forward to our journey's end. This night when we are most conscious of the movement of time is very much the best time to examine the trajectory of our lives. The best time to ask: Am I following in my Saviour's footsteps? Am I? To ask: What steps can I take in the year ahead to keep me on the narrow path? What will I say when the man on the Cross finally comes to take us to our Father's house?

Right at this moment, the year ahead is a completely blank slate. What words will you write on it? How will you fill that page? Take time to consider: the years come quicker and quicker. Time yet to make sure our words our lives speak will be worth the saying.