

Long goodbye: John 17:20-26; Acts 16:16-34

by [Amanda Wright](#) in the [May 18, 2004](#) issue

How do you say goodbye? It depends, I suppose, on the relationship—what it has grown to and what it will become. For Jesus, preparing to leave the close society of his disciples seems to have been a long process. Almost from the beginning he gently, or sometimes in exasperation, explained that the course his life was following would lead to profound changes in *their* lives. So he began saying goodbye early.

When families get together to say farewell to someone moving away, or to celebrate the last few days of someone's single life before marriage, they often rummage around and get out old photographs. These pictures stimulate an extended round of reminiscence—where holidays were spent, the worst car journey, Aunt So-and-So's funeral. Before an impending change, people tend to reflect on how they got to where they are. They are preparing to say "Goodbye."

Jesus' final conversations before his arrest are like family gatherings. One member is reminiscing about where family members are now and how they got there. Look how these memories fit in with what I have been saying to you, Jesus says. Remember that I was always with you, but that soon I will be with you in a different way. Say goodbye to the old way.

When a girl who can tell fortunes starts following St. Paul around as he goes to prayer in Philippi, shouting that these men are servants of God and have come to tell the citizens how to be saved, Paul loses his temper and tells the spirit that gave her this insight to come out. That meant no more fortune-telling, no more payments to her masters from people desperate to have some control over their futures, or at least to see them coming. They would have to say goodbye to all that.

Maybe Paul was annoyed that his well-argued intellectual persuasion and the witness of the disciples' own conduct were overshadowed by this girl's act. How can people change their lives and make an important commitment on the basis of a parlor trick? Unthinkable. As a consequence, the slave girl has to say good-bye to her old way of life, to the extra favor that her fortune-telling brought her. She stops being "the slave girl who tells fortunes" and becomes nearer to being herself—not to the task she performs but the person that she is. We don't even know her name. Afterwards she fades from the story.

She may have had to say goodbye to being of some importance in society, but she also needed to welcome a new future. We don't know if she acted on her insight into Paul and Silas's mission and became a follower, but the jailer did. He threw all his eggs into one basket and brought his whole family into the family of the baptized. It was an immediate and complete rejection of the old life and an embrace of the new. There was great joy in that household, but also a release from fear, the fear of failure that would cause a family man to attempt to take his own life. The fear that would make people want someone else to tell them what was going to happen in their lives, and no doubt also to tell them what to do and who to pay to change any unpleasant predictions. The jailer's fear was replaced by a trust in God.

I live on a small island off the west coast of Scotland. There are two centers on the island of Iona that are run on behalf of a scattered religious community of the same name, and up to 100 guests are received here each week. It is neither a conference nor a retreat center, but a place where we build community by living, working, worshiping and socializing together. Each week the community changes, bringing different people with different attributes, foibles, likes and opinions. Each week we say goodbye to the departing members of the community and wave to them as the ferry bobs its way across the water. Each week deep relationships are cultivated and

then let go as guests return to their normal lives.

Even those of us in the small group of long-term staff who stay for one or three years must eventually say goodbye. We all know this when we arrive, but it's still difficult. Iona is a place to be, and then the place from which we are sent out into the wider world. We welcome the fact that we are changed, that we are saying goodbye to what has been formed in the past and acknowledging how the past brought us to where we are now. It was good, it is over, so where do we go now? We can still be present in each other's lives, but our methods of communication are less immediate—letters, phone calls, e-mails.

John thought that it was important to remind those who had never met Jesus in the flesh that Jesus was still present, but in a new way. Not in the way that he had been, but in a real way, in an immediate way, in the constantly forming community of believers reflecting the oneness of Jesus with the Father in their own relationship with Christ. They were invited to accept the love of God in fellowship, just as Jesus accepted the free flow of love with the Father.

It's like a family settling down for one last celebration of "now" before they move into the future, with the advantages of knowing themselves better and knowing who is going with them.