



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 08 May 2005
Title: **"Left Behind...Again."**
Comment: The event of the Ascension can perhaps better be understood, and appreciated, by looking at the phenomenon of saying goodbye.
Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Acts 1:8-14
Second Reading 1 Peter 4:12-19
Gospel John 17:1-11

Today is not only the 7th Sunday in the Easter season, it is also the Sunday after the feast of the Ascension: the commemoration of the end of Christ's physical presence on earth. It is, in other words, a rather bittersweet part of this otherwise happy season, because it is a Sunday of goodbyes.

I may have told you before of one of the most moving memories I have of my youth: a train trip from Geneva to Paris with my grandparents in which we had to stop at the border and go through passport control. (This was very long before the unified Europe we have today!) There I saw a family saying goodbye to one of its members who was to board our train. While standing there I noticed that one of the members of that clan was grossly disfigured, perhaps from some childhood disease. Her appearance was startling enough that it drew the attention of all passers-by, including this young American tourist. But there was something else about the woman, and this was the thing that struck me: her disfigured face was covered with tears as she said farewell to someone obvious much loved. I was perhaps fourteen years old at the time, but I nevertheless recognized in that woman's tears a deep and very human beauty. It is an image that has stayed with me all these years.

Saying goodbye can be a terribly wrenching thing, and it doesn't even have to be as final as the death of a loved one...or even a beloved pet. In fact, I've been a wreck just seeing people off at the airport and having to live with the vacuum created by their absence in my life afterwards. Saying goodbye is, if you will pardon a perhaps too dramatic image, a little death; very much as the old song goes, every time we say goodbye "we die a little", and we have to relearn the skill of life "without" the beloved.

To look at the Ascension of Christ in the context of the human emotions involved in being left behind when someone leaves perhaps helps us to understand both what the disciples went through when Jesus left them, and also what it was that Jesus was doing for them by denying them his physical presence.

I have sometimes thought that the celebration of the Ascension is a psychological ploy on the part of the Church- an occasion in which we are told to rejoice despite the fact that we are sad. We can only imagine what it was like to have been with Jesus for three years, to have lost him so tragically, to have received him again at Easter, and then to go through this! Left behind...AGAIN!

And yet, Christ is a good enough friend to help the disciples out. We can see that in the prayer that forms the body of today's Gospel reading from John. In it, Jesus says, "...Now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world. [] Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." And he later prays: "...Now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves."

Jesus is making provision for his friends that they will never be alone. He is telling them that he has special plans for them- wonderful things in mind for them to do- and that he will be part of them.

In many ways, this Gospel reading, taking from a long discourse that John suggests took place at the Last Supper, but which reads equally well as an Easter season

event, is an even better way to commemorate Jesus departure than the straight narrative of Mark, Luke or Acts. In those passages, we are told that Jesus goes to a hill, blesses the disciples, and then disappears into heaven. It's a bit too easy, a bit too much like the Wizard leaving Oz in his balloon. But in John we are helped to understand why we don't have a "real, live" Jesus to talk to and learn from here on earth. And the truth of the matter is much more empowering and encouraging than we might think.

We are told that as wonderful as the Incarnation was- this strange and profound intrusion of the Living God into the life of humankind in the Person of Jesus Christ- it is also very limiting for him. The lessons were taught, the sacrificial death accomplished and the Easter rising again proclaimed in a finite space and time- an historical event that only a relatively small number of people experienced firsthand. What happened after- the spread of the Kingdom of God throughout the earth- this didn't happen because Jesus was around to micro-manage, but because he told his followers to continue the work.

And that leads us back to who are where we are today and to the bittersweet emotions of saying goodbye. There is indeed beauty in the act of parting and even in the pain that we feel; we are reminded of the frail wonder of our humanity and the human heart that shows its power even in the act of breaking. That human love does bind us together, and those who truly love each other remain in heart and mind despite the miles or the years. Have you never noticed that when you meet an old friend, you can often take up where you left off, with the same sense of humor, the same stories, the same emotional empathy? If this is true with human beings, imagine what is being offered when Jesus promises to be with us to help carry on the work and create an ever-greater family of God in the Christian Church.

Ultimately, saying goodbye is going to remain painful, however important or inevitable it might be. But transforming love can at least give it meaning and allow a new and more graceful relationship to continue as fellow Christians connect and reconnect in prayer, in compassion and in faith. Jesus prays to the Father in words that should give us great comfort: "Righteous Father, the world does not know you,

but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Jesus promises to be with us now, and never to leave us behind again.