

The Leave Taking

a sermon preached on the

6th Sunday of Easter

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by **Fr Jim McKenna**
priest assistant at St Luke's
& Chaplain to Bishopspark

Lecton: Acts 17: 22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

The Gospel on this the sixth Sunday of Easter is again taken from the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, words that offered consolation and encouragement to the disciples.

As Ascension Day and Pentecost draw near, the physical departure of Jesus is transformed to the joy of the presence of God within us. The power of this transformation is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The parting of friends is never easy. It was the night before Jesus' Crucifixion, and for some time he had been giving the disciples hints with regard to his death. Now he talks openly to them, except he didn't speak of death in the way we tend to – in the sense of 'life-ending'. He spoke of his death as 'going away' – going to the Father. However, most of this was passing over the heads of the disciples. All they were hearing was the fact that Jesus leaving them, and, physically, so he was.

But there are many different ways of leaving. There is a leaving of abandonment. We often read or hear through the media about the abandonment of the very young by their parents, or of the elderly, by their children. There is the leaving which implies rejection through the break-up of human relationships. There is the leaving which is necessary for good reasons, like returning home after a long absence, and this is certainly true in today's gospel story. Jesus is returning to his Father. He is going home to honour and glory.

Then there is the leaving which is for the good, not only of the one who is leaving, but also of those left behind. This is the truth of what is happening here. "I will not leave you as orphans", he said. He promised them another advocate, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth to enable a divine indwelling within their hearts.

It is reported that when one of the first Russian astronauts returned to earth, he said he had seen no evidence of heaven 'up there', much less of God. An Orthodox Priest responded, "How could anybody see God up there if he had not first met God in here (pointing to his heart)".

The eye of faith is the heart – not in physical sight. When Jesus sat at the well with the woman of Samaria, they were talking at first about water, buckets, springs and wells. But Jesus drew the conversation into the thirst of our hearts.

One of the key discoveries of our prayer life is in recognizing that spring of the Spirit within our heart. God is with us. God is in us. It is to stop thinking and talking about God 'out there', 'up there', and come to know the warm presence of God in our heart. It means growing from a religion of serving God at the outer perimeters of life, to living with God in our soul. This is the indwelling God.

There are seven gifts which distinguish the ways in which the Holy Spirit is the Light and Strength of God in the soul.

The Spirit of Wisdom, which elevates the mind's vision to the height and breadth of God's timeless, comprehensive view of everything.

The Spirit of Understanding, which enables us to accept the truths of faith.

The Spirit of Knowledge which enables the mind to recognize the hand of God in all creation, and in the everyday affairs of life.

The Spirit of Wisdom which enables us to make proper choices and gives discernment in the direction of our soul.

The Spirit of Piety, which is the divine gift which fills the soul with prayerfulness and desire to worship God.

The seventh gift of the Spirit is one of Reverence and Respect for God.

The Easter Gospel readings continually bring before us the changeover from the old way of thinking to the new; from the old life in the tomb, to the new life of sharing in the Resurrection of Christ.

The disciples took a long time to come to the realization that although Jesus was physically leaving them, the teaching of the Holy Spirit and their faith and obedience to the Commandments, would draw them into a closer communion with him.

It is the same for us today. We have the same access to God's presence, and to the help and teaching of the Holy Spirit, as the first Christians had. Jesus is not a vague memory of a person who lived over 2000 years ago, but is a real, life-giving presence that transforms us.

Nowhere do we feel as close to God as when we receive the bread and the wine at the Eucharist. It is there that we are in communion – a holy communion. It is here that our hearts are nourished with God's love. The Eucharist gives us the strength to go out into the world to live and serve the Living God.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

References: John 14:15-21
Flor McCarthy
S. O'Flynn

j.p.mckenna@xtra.co.nz