



# Christian Education

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

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Title: **"Saying Goodbye"**  
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## Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Acts 16:16-34  
Second Reading Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20  
Gospel John 17:20-26

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It is a fact of life here in the Philippines that saying goodbye and hello is a big deal. Just look at the crowds at the airport waiting for overseas workers, the *balikbayan*, either to appear or to disappear at the NAIA terminal. Despite any security precautions, the "piyesta spirit" requires family and friends to be present for the first or last sight of the traveling loved one. It's overwhelming, but it's also heart-warming.

For most of the rest of world, and particularly since '9/11' has restricted access to terminals, saying goodbye at the airport is now a matter of a quick kiss or hug and a screeching getaway before the police tow trucks come to drag your car. This is jarring, but it does save some of the emotional wear and tear that come to people like me who really suffer through long goodbyes.

Perhaps it's having lived so far from home for so much of my career and enjoying it when people do visit. Perhaps it's just that within this tough, rhinoceros hide, I'm just a big, emotional softy. In any case, I hate goodbyes and always get all weepy and hollow inside as I either see someone off or disappear myself into the wild, blue yonder.

So I approach the theme of the Ascension of Christ with a certain natural empathy for the Apostles and their friends as they face the prospect of a post-Jesus world. Did they feel the same way on their return from the Mount of Olives that day as I do driving back from the airport? What was it like to finally be on their own?

The Ascension, which was formally observed on Thursday but which inevitably gets celebrated on the following Sunday, too, is right up there with the miracle stories and the Virgin Birth as something that defies rational explanation and therefore is tough on those who would prefer to think that the story of Jesus is that of a wise and good teacher which his followers have blown all out of proportion so that He becomes a divine being who disappears into the sky.

But there is more to the teaching than aeronautics, and much to be learned from the experience of the bereft Apostles as we look at our own spiritual and personal development. The point of the Ascension is not the *presence* of Jesus floating in the air, but his physical *absence*. The Easter season, fifty days from the first celebration of the Resurrection until Pentecost Day, commemorates the gradual weaning of the infant Church away from its dependence on an earthly teacher, however divine he may also have been.

Christ himself periodically reminds them of the obvious limitation of having even the Savior of the world located in a physical body in a definite space and time. If the Church was going to grow, expand, fill the world, in fact *do more than Jesus himself* could do as part of his race, country and era, then it would need to become focused not in a single body, but in the bodies and souls of all of the men and women who would join themselves to him through Baptism and becoming part of the "new world order" called Christianity in all times and in all places.

Today's Bible readings, strangely enough, do not speak about the Ascension per se. Instead, we have a reading from Acts that talks about the Apostles experience in the first months of the new life of the Church; we have a reading from the book of

Revelation that gives a mystic image of Christ promising to return again at the end of time; and finally a Gospel reading from John that is part of Jesus' prayer for the disciples at the Last Supper. It doesn't seem to connect to the idea of Jesus' eventual absence.

However, the prayer from the Gospel passage not only addresses Jesus' departure, but also helps the disciples, and us, to deal with it. In fact, this prayer is sometimes thought by bible scholars to actually be more appropriate to the Lord's time with his friends *after* Easter. In the prayer, the Lord prays for a kind of unity between himself and the disciples that is profound and lasting: a union of heart and spirit that is usually associated with marriage, but which we are told is Jesus' hope for all of his followers regardless of gender or human marital status. He asks the Father to let them "be with me where I am, so that they may always see the glory you have given me before the foundation of the world." And finally he asks that the Church may be able to make his name known to the world.

When we are far away from those we love, we can feel powerless to help or comfort them when trouble or tragedy comes. We may say that we will pray for those we love, but it feels like a poor second choice compared to physical presence and personal touch. But if we consider the example that Christ gives us, perhaps it's not such a poor substitute at all.

When we pray for those who are far from us, for those who must leave us, for those we cannot see or help, we are availing ourselves of a much greater power than our own love and devotion, however strong it may be. Our unity with those we love isn't weakened by absence if prayer enforces it; in fact it becomes exponentially more powerful, more constant and more dependable when linked to God than it ever could be on its own. It connects with a power and a Person who never ends and never fails.

When we say goodbye to those we love, for however long a time or however vast a distance, we are not ending a relationship or putting our love in jeopardy. In following the example of Christ and by loving them *in Christ*, who had to leave his

disciples physically but never has done so spiritually, we remain more united than ever with those we love- more part of each other's lives and personalities than would have been possible if we just relied on our human hearts and minds alone, bound as they are by time and space.

Remember, at those times when you see people off at the airport, or the dock or the bus terminal, or just at the end of the day, that the English word "goodbye" still means "God be with you." Remember what Jesus prayed that that would mean for those who were in union with him and with each other *in him*: "that the love with which you love me, [Father,] may be in them and so that I may be in them." And that's forever.

No, 'goodbye' is not the end- not for Jesus or for us- far, far from it.