

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Eastertide (A)

7<sup>th</sup> May 2023

‘Renouncing this life’

Acts 6: election of 7 deacons      Ps 32: *the Word of the Lord is faithful*

1Pt 2: *you, the holy priesthood, ... living stones making a spiritual house.*

Jn 14: 1–12: *I am going now to prepare a place for you ...*

All sorts of things are coinciding at this time of year:

1. it’s Eastertide still, the ongoing 7-week celebration of the Resurrection of Our Lord, which changed human history and destiny utterly;
2. it’s May, month of Our Blessed Mother, as evidenced by our recitation of the Rosary before Mass each Sunday;
3. it’s the weekend of the Coronation of the King, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, with all the pomp and ceremony (and rain!) of a British state occasion;
4. and, of course — last but not least — it’s examtide, with all the extra stress and study that that involves for you.

Whenever we come to Mass, we may have all sorts of things whirling around in our life, and yet we can bring all our thoughts, emotions, prayers, and worries to God the Father, in and through Jesus our Saviour and our Friend — *per ipsum et cum ipso et in ipso*, “through Him and with Him and in Him.” Even if any number of things are crowding in on us, sometimes in an overwhelming way, yet

Jesus can field them all, He absorbs them all, He hears all that we place before Him, and He can settle us and bring a new and real, spiritual peace. Even in the midst of chaos, confusion, or difficulty (or, rather, especially in facing such things), we can pray and allow the inner gifts of grace to be given us, gently and infallibly, by the Lord, and encouraged by the hand of His holy Mother. Let’s never forget that. Especially in exam season, never forget that — “the Lord is with you!” Nothing is more important.

As I watched the beautiful rituals and music of the King’s Coronation yesterday — many of them drawn from the centuries of our English Catholic past — (and maybe you caught some of it yourself on TV or internet) I found the most moving moment was in the King’s solemn preparation for anointing: he was completely stripped of his decorative attire, and military uniform, and stood there in his simple white shirt, awaiting the moment that was then hidden from view, the anointing with oil from Jerusalem. For me, at least, there was a sense of the need to let go of all the trappings of prestige and power in order

to partake of the real calling. The ideal of the monarch, the one who would exercise public duty for the people, is that he accept first that he is nothing before God endows him with graces for his life's task. Each of us can echo this, to be stripped of pride and self-importance — to *depart* this worldly attitude of life — in order to receive the gift of a life that is truly godly, spiritual, heavenly.

In the Gospel passage (Jn 14) set for this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, there are some points of connection with this Christian approach of renunciation. First, let me list some of my immediate reactions on hearing this Gospel:

1. that it is the Gospel (vv. 1-6) most often chosen for funeral Masses;
2. that it is simultaneously about Jesus's 1<sup>st</sup> leaving them in His death on the Cross, *and* about His leaving them a 2<sup>nd</sup> time at the Ascension;
3. that it doesn't hide from us the incomprehension of the apostles at what Jesus had to teach them;
4. that it might baffle us, perhaps, when we hear Jesus speaking of the "greater works" that we will do in Jesus's name!

In a way, we can combine all these thoughts into one: Jesus teaches us that *departing is, ultimately, better than staying*. His departing in the *sacrifice* that was His death, brought about the triumph over sin; He offered His life in the greatest act of love. His departing in the *Ascension*, as we shall celebrate in 11 days' time, was the opening of heaven to mankind, and the chance for Him to bestow the Spirit powerfully upon us as the Church. It is indeed, better for Him to go, rather than to stay. His work of earthly ministry was complete, and the disciples would be better served by His withdrawing from them in a visible sense, so as to be closer to them spiritually through Pentecost.

This can, of course, seem hard to grasp. The apostles, Thomas and Philip (and probably the others too), seem uncomprehending, and offer arguments against His departing. "*We don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?*" says Thomas. "*Show us the Father, and then we shall be satisfied,*" says Philip. They're playing for time; they feel they're not ready for His departure. They are feeling vulnerable if He goes from

them. And yet, Jesus says to them some extraordinary words, “*He who believes in Me will perform even greater works than I do myself.*” Jesus is looking forward to their own ministry after Pentecost: He sees full well that the apostles will go out and expand the reach of the Gospel hundreds and thousand times over. Our Lord is speaking, in this passage, don’t forget, to a mere 11 apostles. It’s the end of His ministry, the Last Supper, and yet He has just these 11 around Him. The apostles’ c.30-yr ministry — expressed in part by the Acts of the Apostles that we read so much from in Eastertide — and the 2000-yr ministry of the Church ever since, has indeed been this “greater work” of Jesus: a work not *greater* than His own, for no-one can replace the infinite sacrifice and offering of the Son of God Himself, but an *expanding* of that work to greater and greater numbers of people of all times and places. This could *only* happen, Jesus knew, if He departed from them in the visible, physically human sense.

And, so that brings us to that one other resonance in this passage from John 14: that it speaks powerfully to

those who grieve when they have lost someone in death: “*Do not let your hearts be troubled.*” ... “*Trust in God still, and trust in Me.*” ... “*I am going now to prepare a place for you,*” ... “*After I have gone and prepared you a place, I shall return to take you with Me;*” ... “*where I am you may be too.*” Each of these phrases is full of powerful comfort and hope regarding those who have gone before us, marked with the sign of faith. And yet they rely on our letting go; our acceptance that they can be in a better place. It’s not easy; any more than it was easy for the apostles to let Jesus go and fulfil His mission in the Cross, the Resurrection, and the Ascension; they wanted to keep Him, keep the *status quo*. But that would not have served God’s plan at all. So, too, for us; we want to keep our loved ones for as long as possible here; and letting them go at any age, old or young, is painful. Yet, in God’s sight there is comfort in departing; for those of faith, baptized and living a good life in Christ, “*the Way, the Truth, and the Life,*” we know that the life of the world to come is a better life, without the trials of this life: a life of blessedness and

eternal joy. We must each of us face, at some point, often unexpected, the departure of a loved one; let us ask Our Lord to help us face those departures, to know that He calls them to Himself, and in mercy. His departure was that He might be closer to all of us in the Spirit; their departing is that they can be closer to Him, in the Spirit, and be protected, free from harm, in the presence of the Risen Saviour. *Where I am, says Jesus, you may be too ...*

May the Lord Jesus, Himself stripped of His earthly life on the Cross in order that He might receive a new and glorious Risen life, help us to embrace renunciation when we are called on to. May we accept the loss of things, and sometimes even of loved ones, that we may be blessed with the gift that is greater, and ultimately the gift offered us in faith which is the greatest, namely eternal life and perfect fulfilment. On the road to that acceptance of ultimate 'giving up,' the giving-up of life, may we practice the little renunciations, peacefully accepting the minor losses, after the heart of Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."  
*"Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and still you do*

*not know Me?"* (Always a pointed question for anyone who happens to be named Philip!) *Lord Jesus, help us to know You. Help us to know You better; know You as the Only Way, the Absolute Truth, the Fullness of Life. Help us to be people that cling to You, and not to those things that You would have us renounce. Help us to learn these lessons, even though they are hard: that only in giving up shall we receive ... only in letting go can we let You ... only in dying shall we live.*