

Jesus says, "These are my words, you are my witnesses!" And he says this as he is leaving his disciples. What a great exit line! When I think of Jesus ascending to the Father, it reminds me a lot of something else that always happens around this time of year, and that is - the "traditional" graduations.

It's as if Jesus is graduating from earth, going back to his rightful place at the right hand of the Father. He has made it through the earthly trials and tests and has passed out of this world with honours, just as we think of the many high school students and university students who will graduate and move up to the next level of their lives.

But who really graduated on that day? Was it Jesus, or was it his disciples? Was it us? When Jesus ascended, he turned the church over to us – what he was really saying was, "Your training is finished, I can leave this with you now, you know what I have taught, you remember my words - and you will be my witnesses!" That's our job now – to witness!

Quite a challenge! The disciples were left feeling a little like the students who graduate – they have just been through a marvelous experience full of hope and excitement and then it hits them – I'm on my own now – I'm expected to do something – I don't have someone to make every decision for me and to tell me what to do.

We have two special spiritual graduations coming up in our church soon as well. In the next few weeks, a whole group of young children will be making their first holy communion.

They will be accepted by us as part of our community of faith in a special way, old enough to know right from wrong, old enough to understand that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist, old enough to begin to participate with us in our most precious ritual and old enough to begin to take some steps on their own towards being witnesses of their faith through prayers and sharing.

Next week, on Pentecost, many of our young men and women in the Parish will receive the sacrament of confirmation – always a moment we have traditionally accepted as the time when a young person's faith is declared to the world on their own, not just through their parent's traditions but because of their own commitment and they start to live and witness to that faith with their own responsibility.

So in many ways, although it seems today that it is Jesus who goes away from us, we know he has never really left us, and it is we who are called to step out and take charge. We are not like the parents who have watched their child leave to go on their own, no, we are the graduating children, going out on our own as witnesses to God's word!

Just as parents are proud of their children, I am sure that God is proud of us when we act as true witnesses to his Son's teachings. God wants us to succeed in what we have been trained to do as much as any parent wants success for their children in the things that they have learned. I remember one speaker who told the graduating class – think of your parents, what a feeling of pride they have, what a feeling of relief that you're finally on your own – this would be a good time to ask for money!

And it's the same with God, this is a good time to ask for his help, just when you've received communion for the first time, just when you've been confirmed, just when you have started on a new project in the church, just when you've decided that today is the day you want to be a true witness to the words Jesus taught us!

It takes courage to be a witness, and if we ask for help, we can remember that help will come and we are strengthened for that courage by receiving the Eucharist. Jesus himself becomes part of us when we eat his body, and he will help us when we meet that moment that we are called to publicly profess him with joy.

It isn't easy today – we live in a society that makes it a terrible social mistake to mention your faith in public – isn't it true that when anyone does speak up about God, it can make us feel embarrassed. When you see a sports star or celebrity on TV give thanks and glory to God for their success, the host of the show usually practically trips over themselves to quickly change the subject. Secretly I say “Good for you!” but I also know there have been times when I have remained silent.

We have forgotten that being respectful to other faiths does not mean that we have to hide our own. Speaking out for what is right is what we are expected to do, but there is a feeling that because Christians are in the majority, it wouldn't be fair to others to celebrate our faith publicly. In our western society, an open proclamation of faith is seen somehow as a sign of a lack of sophistication or as a sign of a very right wing conservative and restricted point of view.

You only have to look at how the press treats the people of Islam as if they were all wild-eyed fanatics because they praise God publicly whenever they get a chance, because they wear clothes that identify themselves with their faith. We mistakenly judge this behaviour as just one more sign to us that their outlook is too simplistic, but we, as Christians, could learn a lot from them about how to proclaim our faith in public.

But just as the message for most graduation speeches is hope, we have great hope for the young people in our community to bring the energy we need to revitalize our church. It is us, the grownups, who have to get out of their way and let them go where the spirit is leading them, to stop worrying about safety above all and allow our young people to take risks for the faith.

We will put a gun in the hand of a young person who is joining the police or becoming a soldier and ask them to risk their lives to protect our property, or the little piece of ground we were born on, which we know will pass away, so shouldn't we at least be ready to allow a young person to take a risk to witness to our faith, a faith that leads to an eternal reward?

I've had many people tell me that we need to do more to get young people involved in the church. One of the best ways we can do that is to listen to their ideas about how to change the world and then get involved their way when they want to start helping.

I can think of many examples where young people have made a huge difference, from Craig Keilberger who started 20 years ago with a dozen 12 year old classmates on a campaign to abolish child labour and has had world wide success with over two million people involved and 40 million children helped. And I just heard about a group of young high school girls from Oakville in their senior year who are leaving this weekend to spend six weeks volunteering in a hospital in Africa, where help is desperately needed. This is true witness, these are people who really do remember Jesus' words.

Each of us must ask ourselves – what is my testimony to my faith – how am I witnessing today to what I believe? What can I do right now, right here – what project is calling me to get

involved that I am putting off? What have my children asked me to do and in our lack of faith we've said, "No, it can't be done!" What we are is God's gift to us, what we become is our gift to God.

The disciples were continually in the temple praising God! Be a witness by praising Him with joy here today and taking the time to pray every day for the guidance to know where you are called to witness next, to participate, to act.

Today Jesus speaks to you, he speaks to me and he tells us – We are His witnesses!
Beginning today, not in Jerusalem, but right here in Mississauga!

- Deacon Steve