

The Ascension of the Lord (A)
(Acts 1:1-11 / Matthew 28:16-20)
24.05.2020

Reading today's Gospel narrative one line caught my attention. It is the line which reads: *When they saw Him they fell down before Him though some hesitated.* I emphasise: *some hesitated.* The fact that some *hesitated* set me thinking. I believe it is important for us to try to tease out why it was that some of the apostles hesitated at that moment, for this may well explain why some of us can be led to hesitate along the way.

Those who hesitated in the story were members of the group of the eleven – they were drawn from among Jesus' inner circle. The falling down before the Master of the others in the group is often presented as a sign of their acknowledgement of Christ's lordship; their recognition of Jesus' divinity. Certainly, it was a sign of deep reverence and respect and it could be interpreted as a sign of their worship. Are we to take it that those who didn't fall down before Jesus still weren't ready to worship Jesus as Lord? I am not sure that would be correct. I am not convinced that this was the reason for their hesitancy. I am more inclined to think that the reason may have lain elsewhere.

It is important for us to remember at what point we find ourselves in the Jesus story. This can help us to better understand what might have been going on in the hearts of the hesitant disciples. We are literally just before what is called the *Great Commission* and Jesus' leave-taking of this world. We are a full forty days after Jesus' resurrection. The eleven have been visited by the Risen Christ more than once during that period. They are recorded as having exclaimed: *We have seen the Lord.* Note the appellation they used was a recognition of Jesus' divinity: they referred to Him as *the Lord!* Even the most doubtful among their number (Thomas) had hailed Jesus with these words: *My Lord and my God!* From this I conclude that those who *hesitated* were not necessarily dubious of Jesus' divinity or unwilling to recognise it in a gesture of humble worship. That being said, the question remains: Just what is it that they were hesitant about in Jesus' regard? I am not at all sure their hesitancy had to do with the past or even the present. For forty days they had experienced the Risen Lord's love and care for them. They had rejoiced in all these encounters. They had been shown marvellous signs which expressed Christ's concern for them – signs such as the miraculous catch of fish. You will recall how on that wonderful morning, after the Risen Christ had prepared breakfast for the apostles on the seashore, He had confided to Peter the care of His flock. We can take it that if this mission was confided to Peter by Jesus in the solemn way it was, this is because Jesus, the Good Shepherd, was about to take leave of this world. Christ's words to Peter made it clear that it was now up to the apostle to pursue His mission on earth. The others would have been aware of Peter's encounter with the Risen Lord (they were witnesses to it, for they were near at hand when it took place); they will have deduced the implications of what Jesus said to Peter for all of them. Already, what we call Jesus' *Farewell Discourse* in John's Gospel had prepared the whole company of the disciples for His taking leave of them. We can assume that it had become increasingly clear to the eleven, as time passed, that Jesus' actual mode of presence to them – His regular, albeit somewhat strange and frequently quite unexpected visits – would not go on as He had hitherto.

It is worth noting that there had been a physical aspect to some of Jesus' appearances. He had eaten with them, He had invited Thomas to approach Him so that He might touch His flesh and feel His bones. Jesus' physical mode of being present to the disciples was about to be withdrawn. This leads me to suggest that the hesitancy of some of the eleven had to do with their fears for the future. We can appreciate that the idea of losing the ways of relating to

Jesus they had known hitherto would have presented a big challenge to some of the eleven. The idea of losing the physical presence of someone we love is a challenge for all of us. (I think of one family today, sitting by their dying mother's bedside. They are finding it hard to *let go*.) To *let go* is something we can be reluctant to do, slow to accept; it is something we can be inclined to pull back from; to want to defer... if not completely deny and dismiss. Maybe this thought helps us to understand and sympathise with some of the eleven's hesitancy a bit better.

Moreover, we can fairly assume that among the eleven the memory of what Mary of Magdala had relayed to them after her initial encounter with the Risen Lord will have remained with them. Jesus had made it clear to Mary on Easter morning that He was to ascend to heaven. The Risen Lord had cautioned her: *Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But, go find my brothers and tell them that I am to ascend to my Father and your Father, my God and your God.* The eleven had been forewarned that the Risen Jesus had to take leave of this world. They had been told that He was going to ascend to be with the Father. It seems to me that the memories of some of the eleven as they approached the place of meeting Jesus had given them in Galilee would have turned to what Mary had told them. This would have set them thinking; they would have found themselves considering what life was going to be like without Jesus around. Asking themselves, how they were going to face the future without His presence by their side. I suspect that the hesitant among the eleven were somewhat afraid of the responsibility they knew was going to be confided to them by the Master. I suggest the disciples will have had an interior inkling of the Great Commission about to be confided to them and that some of their number will have hesitated at the thought of it.

If we are honest, I think we can readily sympathise with the hesitant among the eleven. For, let's face it, signs of the confidence and trust the Lord has placed in us to pursue His mission on earth can daunt us at times. On occasion, thoughts of the mission the Lord has confided to us can frighten us, to the point of leaving us feeling nearly paralysed. The disciples' hesitancy to fall down before the Lord was probably due more to their quasi-paralysis before the enormity of what they already knew interiorly the Lord was going to ask of them than it was a questioning or a rejection of Jesus' divinity. Their hesitancy was more symptomatic of their fears for themselves. It was this which explains their impossibility to react at all. They probably *just didn't know what way to turn*, as we say in popular speech. Just like the hesitant among the eleven, some of us can ask ourselves questions such as these at times: *Who am I to be confided the charge confided to me? How will I ever be able to accomplish the task before me, given the knowledge we have of my own limitations and weaknesses, deficiencies and flaws?*

The answer to those questions (the disciples' questions and our own) is given to us in this morning's Gospel passage. It is the assurance Jesus gave to the eleven and which He gives to us, in turn: *I am with you always, even to the end of time.* The Lord has told us that He will be with us whatever is asked of us in His service. He will not ask of us something beyond us. If the Lord confides a mission to us, even if our own human capabilities are not quite adequate (Peter's certainly weren't!), even if we are not exactly up to the mark, then we can and must trust in God to supply what is lacking in us. Saying that leads me to think of the words of a psalm which tell us: *Unless the Lord build the house, it is in vain that the builders labour.* The implication of those words is that if the Lord takes the initiative and decides to build the house with our help, using us as simple labourers, then, however unfit for the task we may assess ourselves to be, if only we agree to take on and do what He requires of us to do, we will be able to achieve what is asked of us. This should encourage us to face the tasks set

before us – however far beyond our reach they appear to be. The call addressed to us is to approach whatever is asked of us by God as poor co-workers, lowly servants, men and women sent to accomplish the Lord's own work in whatever we are told to do in His name. The important thing for us is to rely upon divine strength deployed in human weakness. It is only when we do this that we will ever accomplish anything good for the Lord and for others, in His name. Our inadequacy will manifest that whatever we are called to undertake in obedience to the Lord's call upon us, is not our affair, but *all God's work in us* (to use a Pauline phrase); a task undertaken not for our glory, but for His! Here I am reminded of that word found in the *Vine Discourse*, found in chapter 15 of John's Gospel: *Without me you can do nothing*. Just as I looked not only at the words of psalm 126 as we read them a few moments ago, but also their implications for us, so I believe the Gospel word in the *Vine Discourse* I have just quoted implies that *with the Lord we can do all things!* We will be able to do whatever the Lord asks of us, as long as we advance in the certitude that the work we undertake is not undertaken at our initiative, but in accord with the Lord's instruction. What matters is not our work for God, but God's work in us! You will remember how when Mary protested that what was asked of her was simply impossible, she was told: *Nothing is impossible to God*. The simple word of advice (indeed, the rather direct word of instruction) Mary spoke many years later to the servants at Cana in Galilee, bidding them to do whatever Jesus told them to do – *Do whatever He tells you* – were doubtless rooted in the Virgin's own experience of God having been able to do the impossible in her life, simply because she had situated herself as His *lowly handmaid* and accomplished what she was told to do.

To know that they were about to receive the *Great Commission* was for some of the disciples quite intimidating thought. We can understand that *some hesitated* before the charge confided to them – not least because they knew it would involve a great personal cost. The cost involved in consenting to God's will had not been hidden from Peter on the lake shore when Jesus said to him after He had bidden the apostle to feed the sheep: *When you were young, you were able to do as you liked and go wherever you wanted to; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and others will direct you and take you where you don't want to go*. For the evangelist to add: *Jesus said this to let him know what kind of death he would die to glorify God. Then Jesus told him: Follow me*.

Not quite a week ago we celebrated the centenary of the birth of St John-Paul II. Quoting the words from chapter 21 of John's Gospel I have just referred to, I cannot help but think of how John-Paul II explained what he experienced in the Sistine Chapel on the day of his election as Bishop of Rome. When he heard his name being called out, he hesitated for moment before the enormity of what was being asked of him. Just then, at that point, he heard ringing in his heart the lyrics of a favourite hymn: *Lord, You have come to the seashore*. That hymn says simply:

*Lord You have come to the seashore,
neither searching for the rich nor the wise,
desiring only that I should follow.
O Lord, with Your eyes set upon me, gently smiling,
You have spoken my name.*

The hymn goes on to put these words in the mouth of the apostle called:

*In my boat you find no power, no wealth.
Will You accept, then, my nets and labour?*

Pope John-Paul II headed into his new mission rather defenceless, vulnerable, aware of what he lacked, but confident in what God would provide. This took away his fears.

Like Peter on the seashore, like the eleven who had gone to the mountain in Galilee, where the Lord had arranged to meet them, each one of us is confided anew our own little part in the *Great Commission*. Bearing this in mind, as I speak here this morning, I hear ringing in my heart the lyrics of another well-known hymn. I share them with you by way of comfort and encouragement and as the conclusion to this morning's reflection. I quote from the hymn,

Lord You give the Great Commission:

Lord, You bless with words assuring:

'I am with you to the end.'

Faith and hope and love restoring,

May we serve as You intend.

And amid the cares that claim us,

Hold in mind eternity.

With the Spirit's gifts empower us

For the work of ministry.

Amen!