

Homily Ascension May 28, 2017

Every three years when this Gospel is read for the Solemnity of the Ascension I am struck by the statement that, as the apostles saw Jesus on the mountain just before the ascension into heaven, we are told: "When they saw Him, they worshipped but they doubted." (other translations say some doubted). So I thought I would do a little more research. One of my standard Catholic homily helps simply referred to the fact that in Jesus' appearances after the resurrection, it was in a glorified, bodily state and it was not necessarily always as a replica of his bodily image before death and resurrection. And so there were some people who did not see and recognize Jesus after the resurrection.

Beyond that other commentaries suggest the doubters referred to the past (as with Thomas). Other commentaries suggested it referred to people, other than the eleven apostles. At any rate it does raise the issue of doubt. We all experience doubt in one way or another, whether it is about expected behavior of another person, our ability to do one thing or another, or about the truth of one religious proposition or another.

The catechism speaks of doubt in its presentation on Faith, in the context of the First Commandment. Doubt stands in opposition to Faith. In its few words it distinguishes voluntary doubt from involuntary doubt. Voluntary doubt about the faith disregards or refuses to hold as true what God has revealed and the Church proposes for belief. This implies a free will decision on the part of the one who is doubting. Involuntary doubt refers to a hesitancy in believing, difficulty in overcoming objections connected with the faith, or anxiety over the obscurity of some matters of faith. While its involuntary nature doesn't blame the doubter the catechism does caution that if we deliberately cultivate such doubt it can lead to spiritual blindness.

There are a number of factors that can contribute to experiencing some religious doubt. At the core is our human imperfection due to original sin, which has weakened our will and shaded our intellect. We cannot forget that the evil one resents our faith, which is a gift from God that must be nourished. The devil can somehow tempt us to doubt our faith and question experiences of faith. Whenever people make a confession as part of a return to the faith after many years I always warn them that they may experience some off the wall temptation, not so much to committing a particular sin as much as to cause doubt about the authenticity of the forgiveness of sin they experienced in a simple but profound act of sacramental reconciliation. We can be distracted by a surrounding culture

of disbelief or indifference. When we are surrounded by a certain silence or even contempt about religious matters it is easier to doubt. Moral weakness can sometimes encourage doubt when being faithful to the teaching of Christ is challenging. It might seem easier to doubt than act according to our beliefs. Doubt can be nurtured by the failure to enrich our faith through pursuit of a greater understanding of the faith through study. Finally, the failure to speak to God in prayer will lead to a weakening of faith as it becomes a resistance to God's desire to touch us.

However, doubt is only a side note to the celebration of the Ascension which really celebrates something quite the opposite. The feast of the Ascension is a positive and certain proclamation about the divinity of Jesus Christ, what He has accomplished and the mission He has placed before us.

Each year the Church provides us with two descriptions of the Ascension. The first reading is the same each year. It provides St. Luke's description as found at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. The Gospel varies for each of the years of the three-year cycle. This year we have a brief description from St. Matthew which succinctly captures the main points of the event. First we are told the eleven, as they gathered worshipped Him. This is the clearest certain acknowledgement we find of the recognition of Jesus' divinity in the Gospels. Only God can be worshipped. Jesus affirmed the reality Himself when He made His clearest self-identity as divine. He noted that "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me." And that was followed by what we call the great commission: to the apostles, to the Church and to each one of us. "Go, therefore" He said, "and make disciples of all nations." And He further clarified that disciples are initiated through the specific act of a baptism using the Trinitarian formula and they are to observe all that Jesus has taught."

In order to fulfill our response to the great commission we must be more people of faith than people of doubt. As people of faith we should continually review our lives to assess to what degree every aspect of our life is under Jesus' dominion. We should recognize how much our actions are, then, under the influence of Jesus. We must be disciplined in prayer and learning so as to nurture our faith. Most importantly we should act according to that faith, especially in terms of charity to our brothers and sisters, so that we can effectively draw others to Jesus Christ. The fruitful actions that give witness to our faith in Jesus and His dominion over our lives are perhaps the greatest antidote to doubt and the nurturance of hope for our own future ascension.