

Third Sunday of Easter B: April 14, 2024

"... they were still incredulous for joy and were amazed..."

Some time ago, I read an article in a rather well-known newspaper voicing the opinion that to truly understand the agony that Our Lord endured in His sacred Passion, one needs to focus not so much on the wounds He endured but, rather, on His loneliness, on Jesus' utter sense of rejection which He endured, which rejection reached its zenith in His cry: *"Eli, Eli, lema sabachtani," "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"* (St. Matthew 27. 46) I supposed what got under my skin was the author's complaints against Mr. Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*. The author seemed to imply that so much focus on the *bloody details* of Jesus' physical suffering detracted from His deeper suffering.

The problem that the author seemed to be in his setting up was an either/or situation: either accept the Lord's bodily sufferings or accept the deep anguish of His soul, or, perhaps, even better, accept the deep mortal anguish of His consciousness, to use a more modern language system. The problem is, do we really have to set up an either/or situation? Rather, in looking at the Lord's passion and His subsequent Resurrection stories, is it not more intelligent, and, certainly not more faithful to the text of the Scripture to say both/and rather than either/or? Let me explain.

In last week's Holy Mass of the Divine Mercy, we read from the account of St. John, which recorded the first two visits of the risen Lord to His Apostles. This week, we are reading basically the same story, except from the lens of St. Luke – and this is only the first visit of our Divine Lord – *in His risen and glorified body – the same body which the Twelve had run away from in horror having seen It mutilated by the torturers and the crucifixion* – to His beloved Apostles. What does the text of the Scripture say about the reaction of the Apostles when Jesus comes to them? Well, two things happen to the Apostles when Jesus appears right off: 1) Jesus appears to them and says: *"Peace be with you! But they are startled and terrified and [think] they are seeing a ghost."* (St. Luke 24. 36)

Now, just to put this little sentence into context, let me remind you that right before this visitation of the Lord takes place with the eleven Apostles, they have just learnt that Jesus has appeared to two disciples who had been making their way to a little village named Emmaus. The two men were completely shattered by all that had happened to their Master in Jerusalem. Even though they had heard a strange tale about the Lord appearing to Mary of Magdala, they didn't know what to make of it. Suddenly, a *strange Man* begins to walk with them... and, more importantly, along the way, the Man *opens their minds to the Scripture and "[b]eginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interprets for them every passage of Scripture which refers to Him."* (cf. St. Luke 24. 27) Soon night begins to fall, and, pressing the Man to stay with them, He breaks bread with them, and, as the bread is broken, *"their eyes are opened... they recognize Him in the breaking of the Bread."* (St. Luke 24. 31, 35)

The two men have just told this strange story to the Eleven when Jesus appears to them – this explains point # 1, *"they think they are seeing a ghost."* We will come back to point # 1, but first, we must go to the second point, # 2) After Jesus proves that He is not a ghost, *"... they were... incredulous for joy and amazed."* (St. Luke 24. 41) And again, just as He did with the two disciples walking to Emmaus, the Lord *"opened their minds to understand the Scripture."* (St. Luke 24. 45)

To really understand the meaning of Easter, we need to examine the two points that I have raised, namely, that the Eleven, upon seeing Jesus, thought they were seeing a ghost, and, with Jesus' teaching, their subsequent joy.

Monsignor Sheen makes a very interesting statement about the Twelve and their reaction to meeting the Risen Lord: *"At first they were too frightened to believe; now they were too joyful to believe."* (1) That insight of Monsignor Sheen is one of the better insights regarding the working of the human mind and emotions that I have read in quite a while. Think about it. All through the ministry of the Lord, He had been preparing His followers for *His death and Resurrection*. As Sheen points out in any number of pages, whereas all of us think of ourselves as being born to live, and especially when we think of the great men of the earth being born to a great destiny, such was not the case for Jesus. The Lord was born for one thing, and one thing only. Jesus was born to die for us, as the Creed quite clearly points out to us: *"Who for us men – and for our salvation - He came down from Heaven. And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made Man. He was crucified also for us, suffered under Pontius Pilate, and was buried. And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures."* All this He was born for: *"for us men, and for our salvation."*

And every time the Lord tried to tell His followers this truth, for example, when Jesus gave the Keys to the Apostle St. Peter, or when He came down from the Mount of the Transfiguration with the Apostles, Sts. Peter, James and John, telling them to be silent until after His Resurrection from the dead, they simply did not or could not comprehend what He was trying to tell them, even though they had just witnessed the miracle of His transfigured Body and His visitation with Moses and Elijah: Jesus was, simply, just too much for them.

So what does Jesus do to take away their fear, so that their fear can be turned to joy? Very simply: *"Look at My hands and feet, that it is I, Myself. Touch Me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have."* (St. Luke 24.39) Remember, St. Thomas is not with the Apostles at this first visit. Could this be why he demanded so vehemently to see the nail-marks in the hands and feet of the Lord, and to place his hand in the side of the Lord? And after Jesus allows the Apostles to touch Him, He then goes a step further, asking them if they have anything to eat, casting all of their doubts about his *ghostly character* away completely. But remember, as Monsignor Sheen points out, *"after raising the daughter of Jairus, He ordered that food should be given to her; after*

the resurrection of Lazarus, Lazarus took food with Him; now after His own Resurrection, He ate with His Apostles.”
(2) The mere eating with them would have been the greatest sign for them of His true *bodily* presence among them.

But! What kind of *Presence*? Have you ever stopped to think about the fact that when Jesus rose from the dead, He didn't simply *resume* the life He left – His life in His Resurrected Body was something totally different? The reality of the ‘total change’ of His life in His Resurrected Body is made obvious not only by the Gospel we have just heard (the shock and fear which is followed by joy of the Apostles), but also in the story of Jesus’ first appearance to Mary of Magdala. Simply look at the details. Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene and, when He appears to her, she does not recognize Him, so changed is His appearance: she thinks He is the gardener. There are some words that the Lord spoke to Mary of Magdala that have always troubled me; I have never quite understood them. In looking at a little book written by Cardinal Ratzinger many years ago, entitled *Dogma and Preaching*, I think I may have found an answer to my query. First the question and then the Cardinal’s insights that are really spectacular: When Mary finally *sees* Jesus (she recognizes Him when He speaks her name), it seems that she somehow embraces Him in a way that displeases the Lord. Jesus says: “*Noli me tangere*” “*Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.*”

Question! How is it that the Lord, in the Gospel of St. Luke willingly submits to the touches of the Apostles, in fact, He seems to invite them, but, in the Gospel of St. John, He does not want poor St. Mary Magdalene to “*cling to Him?*” Also, in the Gospel of St. John, as we heard last week, the gloomy and doubting St. Thomas will be invited, not simply to touch the Lord, but even to place his finger in the nail-marks and his hand in the side of Jesus.

Ratzinger poses a fascinating theory:

After the happy reunion on Easter morning Magdalene wants simply to return to the old intimacy and leave the cross behind her like a bad dream. She wants to have ‘her Teacher’ for herself as in the earlier days. But that is utterly incompatible with what has happened since then. No one can now have Jesus as ‘his rabbi’ without reference to the cross. For Jesus has now become the one who is exalted at the Father’s side and accessible to every human being. Consequently, the paradox: Here on earth, in a merely earthly kind of closeness, he is no longer touchable; but he can be touched as the risen Lord. (3)

But, what does that mean, that Jesus can only be touched “as the risen Lord?”

Jesus gives us the answer, just as He gave the answer to the Apostles when “*He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures:*”

Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins would be preached in His Name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. (St. Luke 24. 46-48)

Are the Twelve ready yet to go out to all the nations – *as it is written?* No, not yet. As yet, the Spirit had not yet descended upon them. As yet, even though they are “*incredulous for joy and amazed,*” they are still being moved back and forth by their wild emotions, their fear and their joy, their doubts and their pain. Doesn’t that sound very much like... you and me? So... what to do? We must learn to ‘know’ the risen Jesus, and He will teach us joy!
Cardinal Ratzinger wisely remarks:

To ‘know’ the risen Jesus... is to launch out on a journey that has Him for its point of origin... When we ‘ascend’ and adore, we too are released from the constricting limits of our purely private existence and we allow Him to send us forth; we learn to share, in our own poor way, in His all-embracing life. Faith, worship, service: all these are inseparably interconnected and manifest the dynamism of a life that is open to the world-transforming mission of Him Who rose from the dead in the Father’s presence. (4)

The author of that newspaper article that I mentioned at the beginning of this article makes a good point, I suppose, in saying that we must be careful, as we ponder the bloody wounds of Christ, not to lose sight of the deeper wound, that of His abject sorrow, His taking on of our estrangement from the Father. On the other hand, are not His bodily wounds, properly considered, the signs of His broken Heart, which cried out at the end of His cruel Passion: “*My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?*” That cry was accompanied by another word: “*Sitio!*” “*I thirst!*” And, the thirst of Jesus of the Heart of Jesus can only be fulfilled by a cry of recognition from our hearts.

Thus it is that we cry out for knowledge of the risen Lord – knowledge which can only be fulfilled, as Cardinal Ratzinger has pointed out, in faith, worship and service. Let us go, then, to Mary, Sedes Sapientiae, Seat of Wisdom, let us stay very close to Her: if we try to keep our minds and hearts very quiet, She can teach us, and we will feel in our hearts and learn in our minds the ever-growing light of the joy of Easter.

1. His Grace, Archbishop F. J. Sheen, *Life of Christ*, McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., New York, 1958, pg. 441
2. *Ibid.*, pgs. 441-442
3. His Eminence, J. Cardinal Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching*, Franciscan Herald Press, 1985, pg. 50
4. *Ibid.*, pg. 51