

The Ascension Commandment

Our Lord's mission closed on the note of conversion. Indeed it could have closed on no other, for he had only a few believers around him – one hundred and twenty of them – so that there was no other programme to announce. It was directed to all men. He said to his disciples: 'Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptised shall be saved, but he who does not believe shall be condemned' (Mk 16:15).

That Commandment was delivered on Mount Olivet. It was more than the place of the Ascension. Tradition assigns to it a multitude of events in Our Lord's life; including a cavern which was his favourite spot for instructing his disciples and where he gave them the Our Father. The mount lies to the east of Jerusalem about two-thirds of a mile from the gate where St Stephen was martyred. The road crosses the Valley of Kedron to Gethsemane, after which the ascent through dense trees is steep, passing the spot where Our Lord wept over Jerusalem, up to the site

of the Ascension which is about five hundred feet above the valley.

That scene of the Ascension must have been a surpassing one. All those disciples now fully realised with whom they were dealing. They believed utterly. They took him literally. They knew what they had to announce. He made them aware that he would continue with them even though he was departing from them. They realised that his promise of the Paraclete meant his presence with them in another way, and that the Paraclete was going to teach them all things and give them divine strength. Therefore they caught much more than a glimpse of their mission. Its details were not communicated to them but their enlightened intelligence painted a picture for them even before their reception of the special missionary graces which the Holy Spirit would impart.

To them the world was a totally different conception from what it is to us. To us it is a comparatively small orb revolving in a vacuum, surrounded by innumerable other bodies about which we already know something. Some from among us have journeyed out a quarter of a million miles into that void, have landed on our nearest neighbour, and have come back with the account of their experiences garnished with cine and still photos in colour and black and white. More than that, they talked to the Earth from there and the Earth talked back to them. Furthermore, all that is only a beginning.

In regard to this Earth, we know much, so much as to make us able to visualise every bit of it. And really a trip could be arranged to absolutely every spot of it. Why, our own Legion probably contains members of every race on Earth, and great numbers of them have come here to visit us. Your own aspirations aim at visits

to far-flung parts. Time and money are the only limiting circumstances.

But to the disciples on Ascension Thursday, all that was even to their illuminated minds a sealed book. They were citizens of it who had never passed its frontiers. Of course they had heard plenty about the adjacent lands. The Jews were a scattered people and communities of them existed in a wide circumference of Jerusalem. Even the distant Jews regarded it as a duty to come to the centre of their race and worship. Remember that the only place where the sacrifice was offered was the Temple. Even though they realised – as we do in regard to the Mass – that the benefit of the sacrifice was transmitted to those united with it by faith, still they yearned to be present at it, just as we would if Mass were said at only one place in the world.

Actually an example of this was before the apostles eyes at that time. Pious Jews from every nation had flocked into Jerusalem to fulfil the Paschal Precept there and to attend the great ceremonies in the Temple.

But even allowing for the possession of that vague knowledge of the world outside Palestine, the mental horizon of even the best versed Jews would not stretch far out. It would limit itself to the ends of the various trade routes established by Solomon. These would comprise nearer India, Northern Africa and Spain. Of the rest of the world we may say they knew nothing. They would have no idea as to how far the land and sea extended. Daring travellers would have reported that no matter how far they had gone, there was still land and water beyond that point. So where did the Earth end?

Although the researches of the Egyptians and Greeks into astronomy were remarkable at that time and had

revealed to them that the Earth was not flat but a globe revolving in space like its neighbours, this was a notion far removed from the minds of those who listened to Our Lord's last discourse as he was about to ascend into Heaven.

'Go out into the whole world' signified to them a humanly impossible proceeding, a penetration out beyond anything that the most adventurous traveller had brought back word of – out into a wilderness of mystery and imagination inhabited by strange peoples and fantastic, mythical animals. That expanse was so illimitable that presumably it ended nowhere. Certainly no one had ever heard of any boundary to the world. Not even the farthest explorer had ever heard a rumour of there being any end to that outstretching wilderness.

To give a faint idea of what that contemplation must have meant to those first Christians, I mention that sixteen hundred years later it took two years for a Jesuit Brother travelling overland to get from Rome to Macau in China, and the journey entailed the most grievous hardships and peril.

That was the bewildering prospect which was called up in minds by the command of Our Lord. You will realise how preposterous it sounded to mere human thinking. But this was no occasion for such thinking Jesus, their Divine Saviour, who had just ascended into Heaven before their eyes, had spoken those words and he had promised to be with them in the overwhelming prospect. Their task was clear-cut. It was to give their own priceless possession to all other men, to tell them that God had become Man, and had suffered and died to save all men. Everyone without exception had to be told that and induced to believe. Their salvation depended on that belief.

As far as can be judged from the biblical recital, not one of those who thus heard the Lord had any doubts. It would seem plain that his instruction was unquestioningly received by them and reduced to the level of business to be done. There was no selfish cogitation. Perhaps the best way to sort out their thoughts is to ascribe to them our own mentality in the presence of a crisis. This is justifiable, for they were normal humanity. Imagine yourselves in a position akin to theirs, and you have reasonably pictured them.

Note that the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon them to usher in a superior dispensation. So when Our Lord had disappeared into the cloud and the awful shock of their separation from him had passed off, what would be the state of their minds? I would say: an extraordinary mixture of exaltation and bewilderment, of pain and joy. There would be the stupendous reaction from all their old doubts of every kind. Jesus was God. He had ascended into Heaven. He was their own most beloved friend, but more than friend. He loved them and they loved him distractedly. Now he was depending on them and had passed on his own mission to them.

Then there was this wonderful visitor whom he had promised to them. What was he going to be like? Would he be another sort of Jesus? Apparently he was going to come in circumstances of great majesty and for the giving of power.

You will understand from such crises of conflicting emotions and perhaps peril as most of you must have experienced in your own lives that everything in the disciples' minds would quickly have resolved itself down to a strangely matter-of-fact performance. One half of their mind thrilling throughout, the other half would

apply itself to what had to be done immediately. That was to return to Jerusalem.

But before we depart in imagination with them from that hallowed mountain, we must press strongly on a note not so often emphasised. Religious art has enshrined the standing of Our Lady at the Cross, and rightly so because it is part of the essence of the Mystery. But I am not acquainted with any picture which shows her standing beside her son as he lifts himself from Earth in his Ascension. But her standing there is likewise part of that Mystery. Mary had to be there under many heads of suitability. She was the mother and the first believer in Jesus. His Co-operator in Redemption foretold from before history. One day, still far ahead, she will ascend in body as he had just ascended – save (we are told) that the angels will bear her aloft to signify her purely human condition. Moreover her Assumption will be from Mount Olivet.

Those missionary words of her son struck heaviest of all on her ears because they pointed to the next stage of her motherhood. Just as she had to bring forth her babe, so she had to inaugurate and tend his Mystical Body. She will be as necessary to the Holy Spirit in that operation as she was to him in the Incarnation. She will be as necessary to the Holy Spirit in that operation as she was to him in the Incarnation. She cannot go away with Jesus now because that new phase, that campaign of evangelisation claims her. Though so dissimilar in appearance, it will be the same in essence, the continuation of her motherhood.

For those reasons she has to be beside her son on the mountain. Her presence must not for a second be overshadowed or taken for granted. She is there by office as she was at Nazareth or Cana or Calvary. Most

fittingly then does the Rosary include the Ascension in its mysteries.

Let us look at that woman of destiny at this moment of drastic transition. She is about 50 years of age but time has touched her tenderly and gracefully. Her quiet beauty is still there. Nevertheless a careful eye can see the mark of the inexpressible sufferings through which she has passed and which have constituted her as the Mother of Sorrows. Yet that marking has, if possible, made her more appealing and even more lovely, more attuned to our notion of her as our mother. Anne Catherine Emmerich, the Visionary, depicts her as follows at a still later moment when her mortal term was running out: 'I saw the Blessed Virgin as full of years but without sign of old age. There was an indescribable impressiveness about her. As she had grown older, her face became paler and more transparent. She was thin but had no wrinkles or any sign of withering or decay.'

When Jesus departed from sight, it would obviously be to her that all eyes and thoughts would turn in utter solicitude. She was like him. She was part of him still left on Earth. She was still with them and their special source of confidence for the future.

The company turned their backs on Mount Olivet and walked back to the city wall, a distance of approximately two-thirds of a mile. Then through the streets to the great white house, the property of Joseph of Arimathea, where the Last Supper had taken place and where the apostles had been living since Holy Thursday, and which was to be the first headquarters of the Mystical Body. We know it as the Cenacle.

It is likely that they did not march back in a body. It was no part of their policy just yet to attract attention

to themselves. But they were not afraid. St Luke stresses the fact that they were full of joy. Their present mental condition simply would not allow room for common fear. They were in the grip of certain dominating ideas which would impose their mastery on less worthy feelings.

I think it is inconceivable that on reaching Jerusalem they broke up and went to their own homes. Every emotion in them would urge that they stay together to talk, to try to sort out their ideas, to have a meal. You will remember the importance that the early Christians attached to having a meal together.

There would be a catering problem of sorts. I fancy that this eventuality of remaining together could not have been foreseen. The happenings of that day must have been like a whirlwind bearing them whither they knew not. But now they find themselves assembled in the Cenacle and they realise that it is time for a meal. In this strange way does nature obtrude on super-nature and ecstasy alternate with hunger.

However, that preparation of a repast would be facilitated by the simpler customs of the time. Bread and wine was all that was needed and would be readily available. Had cost been a factor, well, Joseph of Arimathea was a very wealthy man.

He is supposed to have been the rich young man of the gospel!

In this manner began the time of waiting. In a talk on the Cenacle I have ventured to suggest that the 120 lived in the house during that period of expectation. The phrase 'persevering in one mind in prayer' is not indicative of persons hurrying backwards and forwards for ten days between home and the Cenacle. Here again the simple living of the day would help. Sleeping only

needed a blanket and six feet by three of floor space. On those terms that mansion could easily accommodate the full number.

So there we leave them with the world at their feet and in longing for the celestial personage who will clothe them with power and provide them with whatsoever they will need. How many days have they to wait? Jesus had said, 'Not many days hence' (Acts 1:6). They had been ordered not to depart from Jerusalem. Their demeanour is not that of persons engaged in a wait of indefinite duration.

On the tenth day the Holy Spirit comes, visibly and with signs as would befit the promulgation of the life in the world of the Mystical Body. I have seen pictures of his descent which did not include Mary. One might as well leave her out of the Annunciation where the same Holy Spirit had come on her to give Jesus to the world. Mary's place in thus inaugurating the Church was primary. She has been compared to a lightning conductor which captures the electric fluid and shepherds it into the Earth.

It was she whom the Third Divine Person saw first and specially. It was through her that the heavenly Fire would part into tongues to settle on those whose mission it was to spread that Fire over the whole Earth.

Her role at Pentecost is virtually the same as it was at the Annunciation. Through her comes the Holy Spirit. He makes her his Co-operator – what we expressively call his spouse – so that she administers his grace and power. Not only that: she is a sort of image of him. She makes him vivid to us so that without her he would be neither real nor intelligible to us. She interprets him to us. She is our bond of union with him. If she is dispensed with, then in the same degree is the Holy Spirit denied to men. For as Vatican II says, she is Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix

and Mediatrix – words which some people would have us believe are intended to mean nothing at all.

Filled with those confident reflections, confront your own prospective missions. You must assimilate those assignments to the campaign proclaimed on Olivet, and you must assimilate your own dispositions to those of the apostles. This is no vain proposition, for they were as human as yourselves. They faced an overwhelming prospect, but in some ways your difficulties exceed theirs. Their world was a limitless and dangerous wilderness but one inclined towards religion. Yours is a jaded multitude which has rejected the supernatural and turned science into an idol.

But we may be sure that essentially the task remains the same. Whatever the difficulty, right faith can press down the balance. Remember that the Holy See itself has given testimony to your legionary faith, alleging that it is of the highest sort. Moreover you are in a quite particular way associated with the apostolic commission conferred by Jesus inasmuch as you are specially united to the Queen of the Apostles whom you exist to serve. Possessing her, you will be filled with the Holy Spirit who will be instrumental through you.

Perfect love casts out fear – just look at a mother saving her endangered child! The sense of mission raises one above personal considerations. A holy discipline, acting on those ingredients, produces heroism. Into that human blending faith instils the divine power. I would be bold enough to believe that in the presence of the same situations as faced the apostles, very many among you would not fall below the level of their achievement. Cardinal Riberi asserted that the stature of the Chinese legionaries was that of the first Christians – no less.

So try to concentrate into your legionary dedication the faith and fiery ardour of that original apostolic band. Be as ambitious as they were. This is no presumption. You, no less than they, are heirs to the Promise and Commission. Here is their programme as pictured to us by Bossuet: 'How foolish the presumption, or how sublime and heavenly the inspiration, which has now taken possession of those fishermen. Consider for a moment their enterprise. Never has prince or empire or republic conceived so lofty a plan. Without any apparent chance of human aid, these Galileans partitioned out the whole world for future conquest. They formed a determined plan to change the religion established all over the world, whether false or in part true – whether Jewish or Gentile. They desired to establish a new worship, a new sacrifice, a new law, because – said they – a certain man whom men crucified at Jerusalem so ordained it.'