

## 6th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

The Readings for the two previous Sundays have focused our reflections on what it means to be a person who accepts Jesus' invitation to live in his love. Today this focus sharpens as our attention is drawn to the essential virtue of obedience to God's will. All the saints, from their own personal experience, come back to this as being fundamental to any genuine spiritual life. This should not surprise us. Jesus himself said that his hunger was not for bread, but for 'every word that comes from the mouth of God'(Matthew 4:4). 'My food is to do the will of the one who sent me, and to complete the work he gave me to do'(John 4:34). 'My aim is to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me'(John 5:30). 'I do nothing of myself ... I always do what pleases God'(John 7:28-29).

In today's gospel, Jesus insists that our obedience is more than external submission to God's authority. It is obedience of the heart. If in our heart we experience God's own respect of and compassion for others we are not going to commit murder, or use another person for our own sexual satisfaction, or perjure ourselves to achieve an unjust verdict in court. The word obedience is an excellent word to describe this basic virtue. It comes, as you may know, from the Latin word *audiens*, which means 'listening' (compare audience), with the prefix *ob*, which means 'right up against' (compare obstruction). We are obedient when we are listening right up close. To obey God is to be close to God and to be listening with the intention of doing what God inspires us to do with all our heart and with joy knowing that God's will is the most beautiful and liberating thing we can do.

This raises two important questions: how do we listen to God? and why do we often find it so difficult? As a first step towards reflecting on these questions, let us meditate on today's psalm. The opening line begins just like the beatitudes. It speaks of the special blessing that comes down upon a person who follows God's law – meaning the way of life which we are graced to live by God who reveals himself to us through nature, through Jesus and the Church, and through our own personal journey. The second stanza reminds us that doing God's will means 'seeking him with all our hearts'. This is important, for there is a danger that we might think of 'the will of God' as something static, determined and unalterable which we have to find out by some subtle process and then accept passively. When God created us he gave us a share in his own freedom. He wants us to be creative, so long as what we create comes from our deepest self and so is an expression of love. God does not want us to obey blindly or automatically without engaging our heart, not does he encourage an attitude that would seek to bypass the burden of making a fully responsible decision, even in the midst of many uncertainties.

God does not command from the outside as it were. God speaks also to our heart and he wants our obedience to come from our heart. He wants us, in making our choices, to heed his loving inspiration which warns us when our desires are not coming from our deepest self and which invites us to contribute to the mission which he gave to his Son, Jesus. This kind of attentive listening is what we mean by conscience. If we are attentive to our heart and listen to the directions of God that are picked up by our conscience, and humbly and faithfully respond to these inspirations from our heart, we are promised a special blessedness.

'Heed the counsel of your own heart, for no one is more faithful to you than it is.  
Your soul often forewarns you. It is better that seven watchmen in a tower.

While you heed your heart, beg the Most High to guide you in the path of truth'(Sirach 37:13).

'More than all else, keep watch over your own heart, since there are the wellsprings of life.'  
(Proverbs 4:23)

In the next stanza of the Responsorial Psalm the word 'precepts' puts the accent on the special care God takes in directing us. The word 'statutes' in the original Hebrew contains the idea of something carved - carved in stone perhaps, like the ten commandments given to Moses; but more importantly carved in our hearts, just as we are carved in the heart of God. God's will is always loving, and delicately so, even though we can often find it very hard to do. In the final stanzas we pray: 'Open my eyes that I may see how wonderful is your law'; 'Train me to observe your law, to keep it with all my heart'.

If we are wondering how we are to listen to God and how we are to know God's will, we have the basis for an answer already. God is certainly revealing himself to each of us in the very best way and he wants us to hear him. We don't have to start the conversation. Our primary task is to listen. To do this, we must, first of all, learn to live an attentive, reflective life. We must stop rushing away from our hearts, for God is speaking to our heart. If we make space for silent prayer, we will be in a position to hear and respond to the God who longs to communicate with us. Secondly, we must realise that if God is speaking to us, then he is speaking also to others. He speaks to us through the Scriptures, through the saints of our church tradition and through those who love us. Because we are so prone to self-deception, God will always confirm his inspirations through those who genuinely care for our soul and are concerned for our spiritual growth.

We find a good example of this in the conversion of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. He experienced Jesus himself in a dramatic and extraordinary way. Yet when he asked: 'Lord, what do you want me to do?', Jesus did not tell him directly. Rather he told him to go into Damascus, and there a man called Ananias would tell him what to do. So the more attentive we are to others and especially to the community of faith in which Christ has promised to be present, the more we will be able to listen to every word that comes to us from the mouth of God - that is, provided we are also in touch with our own heart and listen there for the echo inside us which says Yes to what we hear. The Spirit helps us to discern God's word in the many words that continually impact upon us.

The culture around us makes it really difficult to hear God's word and to do God's will. The cult of the individual distorts the importance of our own ego, of our own feelings, wishes, rights and ambition. It also tends to separate us from community. The more self-reliant we think we should be the less we are likely to listen humbly to others and learn from them. The cult of materialism shifts the focus from the heart to material possessions. Things stop being means that can help us build relationships. They tend to be goals in themselves and relationships suffer in the struggle for the security we think possessions will give us. But apart from these two serious negative dimensions of our culture, each of us personally has to learn to do God's will also when it goes against the following natural drives: we tend to seek joy - that is to say, to seek always what gives us a sense of well-being. God is wiser than our natural desires, and sometimes it is clearly wiser to do something that goes against immediate gratification and is even quite painful. We don't find this easy. We tend to want to look forward to good things in hope and to act in a

way that looks like working out for our benefit. Once again our judgment of this can be quite superficial and even misguided. To follow God's will can mean putting our own future happiness at risk. We don't find this easy.

Fear plays a big role in our lives. We instinctively avoid whatever threatens our sense of well-being. We dread feeling unhappy, insecure and miserable. If God wants to draw us beyond our small egoism and enlarge our heart with compassion and generosity, we might have to suffer some of these negative feelings. We don't find this easy. We tend to grieve whenever something associated with our sense of well-being is taken from us, so we are tempted to hold on tightly to whatever gives us a sense of security. If our hands are so tightly clenched, how can we be open to receive a grace that will enlarge our hearts? If, however, we are truly convinced of God's love and that God is revealing his will to us moment by moment, then we must decide that we want what God wants more than anything and we must get on with the job of making space for reflective prayer, doing our duty, and caring for others while accepting realistically our own limitations. We must be committed to acting in this way, whatever the feeling and whatever the cost. We don't find this easy.

Finally, today's liturgy reminds us of the wonderful blessing that comes to us when we do God's will, that is to say, when we make our decisions out of the communion of love which binds us to God. The Opening Prayer speaks of living in God's presence. We are reminded of Jesus' beautiful invitation: 'Come to be you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest. Learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls'(Matthew 11:29). The Second Reading speaks of 'all that God has prepared for those who love him'. The Prayer over the Gifts which we will pray shortly, speaks of our offerings (the bread and wine and the money which represents a portion of our weekly earnings and so our work and our sacrifice for the community). These offerings are symbols of our offering of ourselves. We pray that we may be purified and renewed and that we might draw closer to our eternal reward. The Communion Antiphon reads: 'They ate and were filled. The Lord gave them what they wanted: they were not deprived of their desire.' God is love. To disobey God is to sin. Sin closes us off from God's love and reaps its own tragic harvest. God is no lover of distraction, waste and mediocrity. God loves us and wants us to live to the full. May we learn, like Jesus, to want God's will with all our minds and hearts and soul and strength. That is the path to maturity and to peace. It is the way of holiness.