

12. Obedience

Communion in love between two people is possible only to the extent that they are able to listen to each other, and are committed to do so. We have already seen that it is the transcendent God who takes the initiative in communicating with us and that God does so through the Word and the Spirit. How can we respond if we are not listening for God's invitation to share God's life and to enjoy the intimacy of communion with God in prayer?

It is not accidental that the word for obedience in the Hebrew Bible is identical with the word for listening. Listening from the heart is essentially what obedience requires. The Greek word for 'to obey' is *hypakouein* which is derived from *akouein* (to listen), with the prefix *hypo* ('under'), indicating a listening from a position of submission. The Latin for 'obeying' is *ob-audiens*, from which our English word 'obedience' is derived. *Audiens* means listening and *ob* indicates that the listening is from close contact and not from a distance. We are obedient when we are listening right up close. To obey God is to be close to God and to be listening for the slightest expression of God's will with the desire and 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.

Teresa of Jesus writes:

'The whole aim of any person who is beginning prayer – and do not forget this because it is very important – should be to prepare with determination and every possible effort to bring your will into conformity with God's will. The greatest perfection attainable along the spiritual path lies in this conformity ... In perfect conformity to God's will lies all our good' (*Interior Castle*, II,1,8).

She concludes the account of her inner life with the following prayer:

'May it please the Lord, since the He is powerful and can hear me if He wants, that I might succeed in doing God's will in everything' (*Life*).

Jesus, whose prayer we are invited to share, constantly insists on the central importance in his life and in ours of wanting only what God wants and of being committed in all things to doing God's will. In essence he is calling us to be attentive to the movements of God in our hearts and in our world. The reason for this is obvious. God is love and God is creating us moment by moment in love and for love. To be guided by God's inspiration is to be guided along the path of holiness. To resist God's inspiration is to resist the gravity of grace drawing us into divine communion. Let us listen to Jesus as he resists the tempter:

'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God"' (Matthew 4:4).

Again and again Jesus reveals the importance of obedience:

'My food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to complete my mission' (John 4:34).

'I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of the One who sent me' (John 5:30).

'I do nothing on my own ... the one who sent me is with me. My Father has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleases my Father' (John 8:28-29).

'Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want ... if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done"' (Matthew 26:39 and 42).

Jesus asks the same of his disciples:

‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as in heaven’ (Matthew 6:9-10).

‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father’ (Matthew 7:21).

‘Pointing to his disciples, Jesus said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother”’ (Matthew 12:49-50).

‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (Matthew 28:19-20).

Luke presents Mary as a model for our obedience:

‘Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”’
(Luke 1:38)

‘Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord’ (Luke 1:45).

How do we listen to God? There is a special blessing that comes down upon a person who follows the way of life that we are graced to live by God who reveals God’s Self to us through nature, through Jesus and the Church, and through our own personal journey. Doing God’s will means ‘seeking God with all our hearts.’ God does not want us to obey blindly or automatically, without engaging our heart. God does not command from the outside as it were. God speaks to our heart and wants our obedience to come from our heart. This is what we mean by conscience: an attentive listening to the movements of our heart that are inspired by God. If we are attentive to our heart and listen to the directions of God that are picked up by our conscience, and if we 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 your heart. Your soul often forewarns you. It is better than 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)

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 God’s Self to each of us in the very best way and wants us to hear. 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.

Furthermore, we must realise that if God is speaking to us, God is speaking also to others. God 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 God’s inspirations to us by also inspiring those who genuinely care for our soul and are concerned for our spiritual growth.

John of the Cross writes:

‘God is so content that the rule and direction of human beings be through other human beings, and that we be governed by human reason, that God definitely does not want us to bestow entire credence upon supernatural communications, nor be confirmed in their strength and security, until they pass through the human channel of the mouth of another human being. As often as God reveals something to a person, God confers upon that person a kind of inclination to manifest this to someone appropriate. Until this is done, we usually go without complete satisfaction, for it is not received from another person like ourselves.’

(*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II.22.9)

Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Testem Benevolentiae* (1899) reminds us that we find a good example of this in the conversion of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. He experienced Jesus in a dramatic and extraordinary way. Yet when he asked: ‘Lord, what do you want me to do?’ (Acts 22:10), 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 and wishes and 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.

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.¹

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. Fear plays a big role in our lives. We instinctively avoid whatever threatens our sense of well-being. ‘We dread feeling unwell, unhappy, insecure, miserable, unattractive, downcast’ (Burrows, page 32). 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.

4. 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

¹ I am drawing here on Ruth Burrows in her book *Ascent to Love*.

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.

John of the Cross writes:

'What does it profit you to give God one thing if God asks of you another? Consider what it is God wants, and then do it. You will as a result satisfy your heart better than with something toward which you yourself are inclined' (*Sayings of light and love*, n. 73).

God is love. To disobey God is to sin. Sin closes us off from God's love and reaps its own harvest. God is no lover of distraction and 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. Wanting what God wants is the essential attitude required of us if we are to enter into prayer and grow in holiness.

The importance of obedience is at the heart of the teaching of Therese of Lisieux:

'Perfection consists in doing God's will, in being what God wills us to be' (Ms A, 1895, 14).

'My God *'I choose all!'* I don't want to be a saint *by halves*. I am not afraid to suffer for you. I fear only one thing: to keep my own will. So, take it, for *'I choose all'* that You will!' (Ms A, 1895, page 27)

'Now, abandonment alone guides me. I have no other compass! I can no longer ask for anything with fervour, except the accomplishment of God's will, without any creature being able to set obstacles in the way' (Ms A, 1895, page 178).

'My joy is the holy will of Jesus my one and only love. And so I live without fear. I love the night as much as I love the day' (words spoken from her sickbed 21.1.1897).

'It is the thought alone of accomplishing the Lord's will that makes up all my joy'.
(Letter to l'Abbé Bellière, July 18, 1897)

Elizabeth of the Trinity (d.1906), a contemporary of Therese and also a Carmelite, writes:

'The soul must surrender itself to the Divine will completely, passionately, so as to will nothing else but what God wills' (*Heaven in Faith*, page 112).

In the final retreat before her death, she uses the image of a harp string that is tuned so that it can sound the note intended by Christ when he chooses to play upon it, and she adds:

'The soul remains under his touch like a lyre, and all His gifts to it are like so many strings which vibrate to sing, day and night, the praise of His glory.'

A Rhineland mystic, Jan van Ruusbroec, writes:

'As long as our will retains whims that are opposed to the divine union, fantasies of 'Yes' or 'No', we remain children, we do not walk with the giant steps of love; for the fire has not yet burned the whole alloy, the gold is not pure, we are still seeking ourselves.'

Charles de Foucauld prays:

'Father, I abandon myself into your hands. Do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you. I am ready for all. I accept all. Let only your will be done in me and in all your creatures. I wish no more than this, O Lord. Into your hands I commend my spirit. I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you Lord, and so need to give myself into your hands, without reserve, and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father.'

Since our focus here is on obedience as an attentive listening to God in our prayer-communion, let us remember the words of Catherine of Siena (d.1380): ‘The merit of obedience is measured by the love in the person obeying’ (*Dialogue: Obedience*, chapter 164, page 355). John of the Cross has the same message: ‘The union of love of God is an habitual and loving attentiveness to the will of God’ (*Spiritual Canticle* 28,10).