

3. An Obedient Heart

Obedience to God is as basic to prayer as it is to every other aspect of our lives. Since ‘there are many paths along this way of the Spirit’(Teresa *Foundations* 5.1), it is important that we follow the path of prayer along which God draws us. The goal of prayer is communion with God which John of the Cross defines as ‘an habitual and loving attentiveness to the will of God’(Spiritual Canticle 28.10). The following advice from John applies as much to prayer as to anything else:

What does it profit you to give God one thing if God asks another of you? Consider what it is that God wants, and then do it. You will as a result better satisfy your heart than with whatever it is towards which you yourself are inclined (*Sayings of light and love* 70).

Teresa concludes her *Life* with the following prayer:

May it please the Lord that I might succeed in doing the Lord’s will in everything (*Life* 40.24).

In the previous chapter we recalled her words on obedience in the Book of Foundations. Elsewhere she writes:

The whole aim of any person who is beginning prayer – and don’t forget this because it is very important – should be to prepare yourself 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).

This teaching on the radical importance of obedience for anyone who desires to pray is repeated by two Carmelite saints from the modern era. Having mentioned her spiritual yearnings, Therese of Lisieux writes:

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 in my soul, without any creature being able to set obstacles in the way (*Story of a Soul*).

Her contemporary, Elizabeth of the Trinity 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*).

In the final retreat before her death, she uses the image of 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.

The importance of listening attentively

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 God’s Word and through God’s 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. In the Greek New Testament the word ‘to obey’ is based on the word ‘to listen’ with a prefix which adds the idea of listening from a position of submission. Our English

word 'obedience' derives from the Latin, which, once again, is based on the word for 'listening'. In Latin the prefix 'ob' adds the idea of listening that is from close contact and not from a distance. 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 liberating thing we can do.

Jesus' obedience and the obedience he expects of his disciples

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 Jesus 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:

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

Elsewhere we hear Jesus say:

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

It was the same, even when he found himself facing crucifixion:

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 ... My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done' (Matthew 26:39, 42).

Jesus asks the same of his disciples:

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 in heaven' (Matthew 7:21).

Obedience from the heart

God does not want us to obey blindly or automatically, without engaging our heart. God's will is discovered in the circumstances of our lives, but always invites a response from the 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 from our heart to these inspirations, we are promised a special blessedness.

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 inspiring each of us, pouring God's loving Spirit into our hearts in the very best way, and wants us to welcome this gift and respond. We do not have to begin the conversation. Our primary task is to listen. To do this, we must, first of all, learn to live an attentive, reflective life, and to do this we must resist the temptation to live our life away from our hearts, for God is speaking to our heart.

The kanji for the Japanese 'too busy' is made up of two elements. One stands for heart and the other for destruction. Most of us live in cities, away from the natural, and generally slow-moving, rhythms of nature. Life is getting faster and faster, and it getting easier to flick a switch and fill up our time with whatever distraction is on

hand. The speed of change has swept us up and gobbled us up. It is possible to spend a whole day without encountering moments that invite us to quiet reflection. We sense that this is not good. We sense that our heart is being destroyed. At the same time, to call a halt and make time and space to connect with our inner spirit can be quite difficult. At least many people find it so. My sense is that this is mostly because we are afraid of what we might find when we go deep into our hearts. This is our biggest mistake. When we are halfway in we do discover stuff we are not happy with. If only we dared to go right in! For then we would find what God sees. Then we would share in God's delight. Then we would discover the founts of energy that would enable us to make the changes that are necessary if we are to do what Jesus wants us to do: 'to live to the full'(John 10:10). If only we would make space for prayer, we would be in a position to hear God and respond to God, the source of our life who initiates the conversation and the communion.

Listening to others

Furthermore, we must realise that if God is speaking to us God is speaking also to others. We should listen attentively to those whose words issue from their prayer, for God speaks to us through them. In fact, 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, or 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, God confers upon the soul 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 II.22.9*).

We find an 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 from the mouth of God'(Matthew 4:4). To be obedient, therefore, we must be attentive to all the ways in which God speaks to us. While we listen to others, however, it is essential that we are also in touch with our own heart and listen there for the echo inside us, the echo that says Yes or No or Perhaps to what we hear. The Spirit helps us to discern God's word in the many words that continually impact upon us.

Both Teresa and John consider the role of a spiritual director or confessor. We are, indeed, blessed if we can find a soul-companion to whom we can open our heart, holding nothing back and knowing that we are loved whatever our weakness or confusion. This is a safeguard against self-reliance. It offers to God a channel of grace that is free from our inherent capacity for self-deception.

Being a soul-companion for another person is a delicate art. People are as diverse as flowers and God has mysterious ways of leading each one into communion. If someone has entrusted the care of their soul to you, you should act towards them out of spiritual love: a love that is free of self-interest, seeking only their spiritual good. If we are to be helped by a soul-companion, we will need to have faith that God is working in and through them. We need to be simple and straightforward, revealing the state of our soul as we see it. How can the director, confessor or soul-companion be an instrument of the Physician of our soul if we are not honest or are selective in what we choose to reveal? If we have chosen to open our heart in trust to a spiritual guide with whom our soul feels at home, God will not let us down if we humbly listen to the words that come to us through the one to whom we are opening our soul. As we listen to his or her words, let us listen to the echo of those words, the echo that arises in our heart. If we are humble, honest and prayerful, the Spirit of him who loves us will use the director's response to guide us, and will enlighten us as to which words we are to follow.

Discerning what it is that God wills

Discerning God's will is sometimes quite difficult. People can be very confident that they are doing God's will, when it is obvious that they are deceiving themselves. On the other hand, people can be very unsure of themselves when it is clear that they are doing God's will. How do we know? What does doing God's will look like? Are there signs that show us that we are not doing God's will?

Much of what we have already touched on in this chapter is relevant here. We need to live an attentive, reflective life in touch with our own heart. We need to have an expectation that God is revealing God's will to us, and we need to be listening for it. However, we need to guard against putting too much trust in our own convictions. The fact that we judge that we are living a prayerful life is no guarantee that it is God's will that we are pursuing in our day to day life. Since God's will is revealed to us also through others, our listening to others, including spiritual direction, is essential.

The only point I wish to add here is that we must see what happens when we do what we think God is calling us to do. Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit in his letter to the Galatians is useful here. He writes:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

If it truly is God's will that we are doing, we will find ourselves growing in these virtues. If, by contrast, we find ourselves becoming less loving, we should have another look. It is likely that we are being deceived and are in fact resisting God's inspiration and not carrying out God's will. Likewise, if we are experiencing a disturbance and lack of joy that won't go away, we should look again at what we are doing. I am not suggesting that doing God's will is always easy. That is clearly not the case. However, if we are doing God's will, even when this involves the cross, there will be a profound joy and a profound peace that sustains us below the pain and difficulty. Jesus felt abandoned on the cross but he was still able to address God as 'Father'; he was still able to commend his spirit into God's care. The same goes for the other virtues mentioned by Paul. Jesus said: 'It is by their fruits that you will know them'(Matthew 7:16). If we find ourselves (if others find us) growing in patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, these are signs that it is indeed God's will that we are doing. If we are becoming less patient, less kind, less

generous, less faithful, less gentle and less self-controlled, we would be foolish to go ahead. A more profound discernment is demanded.

Why obedience can be difficult

The culture in which many of us live makes it difficult to hear God's word and to do God's will. The first element I wish to consider is the cult of the individual. This distorts the importance of our own ego, of our own feelings, wishes, rights and ambition. Of course we should respect ourselves, and we should respect each other and respect each person's point of view. However, there is a danger that we will defend our opinions simply because they are ours, and not because they are reasonable in light of the available evidence. There is no substitute for a personal and communal commitment to the truth of the way things actually are, as distinct from the way we see them to be. We are good at pursuing the truth in scientific areas, but when it comes to more personal matters we tend to drift into a nebulous state that says that there is no such thing as objective truth: everything is a matter of opinion; and no one opinion is of any more value than another. I would like to think that I am exaggerating, but this relativistic view is part of the air we breathe. It seems to be almost taken as obvious, though a little thought exposes it for the falsehood that it is.

Engaged as we are in a real world, we have the capacity to ask questions about it and about our place in it. Our task is to pursue these questions, methodically, honestly and humbly, constantly checking our insights. There is no point in putting on yellow glasses and asserting that the world is yellow. Who wants to live in a make-believe world that fits everything into our personal misconceptions and preferred ways of looking at things? Physics, medical science and psychiatry are not the only disciplines that tell us that only the truth can set us free. Discovering the way things are, as distinct from the way I might like them to be, is a demanding, but rewarding, experience, and something that involves us in a lifelong journey of discovery. In really important matters it can be a difficult journey, but it beats living a lie or existing in a fog of half-truths and unexplored and erroneous assumptions and prejudices.

It matters what we think. It matters that we correct our thinking when evidence demonstrates that we are in error. It is essential that we have the basic humility to know that we have a lot to learn, and that we can learn a lot from others. Growing beyond childhood dependency means accepting responsibility for our own lives. However, self-reliance has its dangers. The more self-reliant we think we should be, the less we are likely to listen humbly to others with a view to learning from them. This affects our willingness to listen to God, and so it affects the value that we give to prayer.

A second element in the culture in which many of us live our lives is the cult of material reality. We are in danger of shifting our focus from the heart to material possessions. Material things are meant to be means for enriching our personal lives and our relationships. They are not meant to replace love; they are meant to express and enhance it. In a culture that exaggerates and distorts our need for material things, it is not uncommon for relationships to suffer in the struggle for the security that we think possessions will give us. People who live for a while in a simpler culture are often impressed by the level of joy, neighbourliness, and community sharing that they experience. This can contrast sharply with the isolation, fear, loneliness and suspicion that many encounter in our more materially 'prosperous' societies.

Apart from these two serious negative dimensions of our culture, each of us personally has to learn to do God's will not only when it fits with our natural drives, but also when it goes against them. We tend to seek joy, wanting what gives us a sense of wellbeing. This is natural and good. Sometimes, however, on reflection we see that it is wiser to do something that goes against immediate gratification and is even quite painful. Athletes go through the demands of discipline to achieve their goal, as do those who wish to learn a musical instrument or earn a degree. Why should things be different when it is a question of nurturing our deepest desires? We do not find easy the discipline of postponing.

We tend to want to hope for what we think will be of benefit to us and to commit ourselves to actions that will lead to a successful outcome. Once again our judgment of this can be quite superficial and even misguided. Sometimes, on reflection, the needs of others, the requirements of love, and a more reflective awareness of our own deeper needs, can challenge us to forgo something upon which we have set our heart in order to embrace action that is for our own and others' greater good. We do not find this easy.

We tend to avoid sorrow. We want to feel good. Sometimes, on reflection, we realize that we have to put at risk this wanting to feel good if we are to embrace God's will. For example, some of us do not like confrontation. We are tempted to let things go, when, for our own good and for the good of others, we should dare to confront the truth. Jesus could perhaps have avoided crucifixion by changing his attitude to the temple authorities, by ceasing to embrace those ostracized in the name of religion, and by softening his approach to truth and justice. He knew, however, as he said often, that to do so he would have lost his self. By continuing to make of himself a gift to others in love, even when it meant suffering the crucifixion, he preserved his self and encouraged us to follow his example and so share in the communion that he experienced with God. We do not find this easy.

Fear plays a big role in our lives: fear of failure, fear of disapproval, fear of being exposed. We instinctively avoid whatever threatens our sense of wellbeing. 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. Sometimes, on reflection, we realise that this is so. We do not find it easy to face our fears and to do what we know is to be done in spite of them.

We tend to grieve whenever something associated with our sense of wellbeing 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? Sometimes, on reflection, we see that we are to enjoy with gratitude the gifts we have, but hold them with open hands and be ready to let them go when truth and love beckon us to do so. We do not find it easy to watch our children leave, or to let a loved one go, or to accept the limitations of growing old. We cannot expect to be doing God's will if we try to avoid the grieving of letting go when life demands it of us. Avoidance and pretence do not liberate.

If we are truly convinced of God's love and that God's will is being revealed 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 do not find this easy.

Obeying a loving God

God is love. God is no lover of distraction, waste and mediocrity. God loves us and wants us to live as we have seen Jesus live: lives that are self-giving, life-giving and love-giving. God is love. Created in the image of God, we, too, are love. Love is not something we have. It is what we are. No wonder we want to receive love and give love. No wonder we are profoundly disturbed when we find ourselves unable to give or receive love. May we learn, like Jesus, to want God's will with all our minds, hearts, soul and strength. After all, it is God who creates us, holds us in being and draws us into the fullness of divine communion. To welcome God's offering of love is the path to maturity and to peace. It is the way of holiness. Wanting what God wants is wanting what is truly best for us and for our world. If we do not really want to discover and do God's will we will find ways of avoiding prayer or of praying in a way that avoids connection with our own heart, with the heart of God, or with both.