

St Joseph
(2 Samuel 7:4-5.12-14.16 / Matthew 1:16.18-21.24)
19.03.2022

The lectionary proposes a choice between two Gospel passages for this Solemnity: the passage from Matthew's Gospel heard in this celebration, or, in its place, the well-known story of the Finding in the Temple recorded in chapter 2 of St Luke's Good News account. This morning I would like to reflect with you on a theme that links both these Gospel passages: obedience to God's will.

In the extract from Matthew's Gospel read this morning the story ends with a little line which is of fundamental importance: Joseph did what he was told to do. Joseph obeyed. It wasn't only here that Joseph was led to obey the Lord's instructions. There were other moments in his life in which he did so. Just think of the flight into Egypt. At that moment too, Joseph did as he was bidden to do by the Lord. Joseph obeyed. After a period of time in exile in Egypt, Joseph was instructed by the Lord anew. He was told to bring the mother and child back to the land from which they had fled. Once again, Joseph obeyed. The Holy Family came back to the land from which they had fled and they settled in Nazareth. I am sure there are many other unrecorded moments when Joseph was led to accomplish God's will in a spirit of humble, trusting obedience. We can take it that Joseph obeyed over and over again as he made his way through life. His example in this respect will have marked the boy Jesus over whom the Lord had set Joseph as guardian and protector, fulfilling the role of human parenthood in regard to the Incarnate Son of God. Like every child of a human family, the boy Jesus will have been marked by the example of His parents – Mary and Joseph. I think it fair to imagine that, like every little boy growing up, Jesus will have dreamed of becoming like his earthly father one day. As the child Jesus observed Joseph, this simple man's trusting obedience will have impressed Him. Jesus will have recognised it to be a value incarnated in his earthly father's whole way of being and one which He, in turn, would want to emulate. Jesus will have been marked by the profound religious spirit of both His parents – Mary and Joseph – and have understood that for the two of them obedience to God's will was primordial. We know how obedience became a hallmark of Jesus' whole existence. The Scriptures underline this aspect of Jesus' way of being. Christ became obedient even unto death. We will sing those words over and over again during the Great Holy Week which we prepare to celebrate at the end of our Lenten pilgrimage. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us: Christ came into this world saying: 'Behold I come to do Your will'. We know from the Gospels how Jesus prepared to take leave of this world, saying to His Heavenly Father in prayer: Abba Father. Not My will, but Your will be done. The alternative Gospel proposed for today's Solemnity – the Finding in the Temple – is marked by the declaration of the twelve year old to His mother, Mary: Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business? In other words: I must be obedient to God. The Finding in the Temple episode will conclude depicting Jesus, who was aware that His first allegiance was to His Heavenly Father's will, nonetheless went back down to Nazareth and submitted Himself to the authority of His earthly parents. The twelve year old boy knew that, for the moment, what was required of Him was obedience to Joseph and Mary in the household of His earthly family. That story concludes. He (Jesus) then went down with them and came to Nazareth and lived under their authority.

I said that I see today's Solemnity as providing us with an occasion to consider the call addressed to all of us to be obedient to God's will. This implies that we learn to listen. How often it has been stated from this pulpit – but I dare to repeat it: Obedience comes from listening. Quite literally, the word obedience comes from the Latin root: ob-audire... from listening.

Clearly, Joseph was a man who listened. The Gospels underline for us that Joseph was a man who listened rather than one who spoke. They do that simply by not recording one single word spoken by Joseph. The Gospels show us that even there where one might have expected Joseph to speak up, he kept silent. For example, it is Mary who spoke to the boy Jesus in the Temple, challenging Him about staying behind with the Doctors of the Law.

Is it not precisely Joseph's silence that permitted Joseph to listen and to hear what the Lord God had to say? Joseph did not make noise. His voice did not drown out that of the Lord God who speaks in a privileged way in the silence.

If, as we see in today's Gospel passage, Joseph listened, he also took time to consider his options. We read how he had decided to divorce Mary informally. Then, unexpectedly, the Lord intervened through that famous dream which led Joseph to change his course of action. The fact that Joseph weighed things up in his mind and still continued to listen to the Lord in his heart is important. It implies that Joseph was actually someone who discerned things properly. This shows us that the obedience shown by Joseph at the end of the story read this morning was not an obedience that was entirely blind. Joseph may still not have seen everything clearly after his dream, but he did have an awareness that the Lord was inviting him to enter into His plan in some way... and he willingly accepted this. The story reveals to us that while Joseph could not understand everything that was involved in God's plan for Mary, for himself, and for the child the Virgin was carrying in her womb, he trusted in God's leading. It is clear that the intention of Joseph's heart was to cooperate with the Lord's action. This manifested itself by Joseph's readiness to deal with the issues with which he was confronted. We are shown how Joseph remained open to be guided by God's Spirit of wisdom, as he discerned the course of action lay before him and how he engaged with it at each step along the way. Speaking like this might (talking of Joseph's weighing things up, considering them fully, etc.) might give the impression that Joseph's obedience was the result of some sort of mental gymnastics. I am not sure that this is the right conclusion to draw. Instead, it seems to me that what is drawn to our attention here is that St Joseph's obedience was mature obedience... and that it stemmed not from mental gymnastics, but from prayer, discernment, listening and communion/communication with God. (Joseph's dreams were certainly privileged moments of communion/communication with the Lord.) All the characteristics of Joseph's obedience should come into play in our lives when we seek to obey maturely.

If Joseph thought things through (and I believe he did); above all, he loved them through. What do I mean by that? What I am wanting to draw out is the fact is that Joseph actually held mind and heart together in his life. Just as we are meant to do! If Joseph's action in response to God's call was clearly thought through, it is probably true to say that Joseph's obedience was more than just a reflected decision and that it was an affair of the heart. Joseph's decisions were clearly linked to his love for Mary and for the child Jesus confided to his care. Like all love, Joseph's loving response was, in some way, beyond reason and understanding – or rather it had its own reasons and understanding. God-given reason! God-given understanding!

Joseph's obedience was obedience in the truest sense, in that it was freely offered! His obedience was not just about servile submission to the will of another; it was obedience born of a relationship of love. Like all relationships, Joseph's relationship with the Lord – as well as that which he enjoyed with Mary and with Jesus – will have demanded of him both patience and humility, and, at the very heart of everything else, a fundamental spirit of trust. To this we might add the notion of confident hope.

The American radical Christian witness and Gospel-fashioned ardent social activist, the late Dorothy Day, wrote at one stage something Joseph surely lived in his life. This is something we are surely called to live in our lives too. She wrote of the need for the believer to have

profound faith in God! I quote her words: Faith is required when we speak of obedience. Faith in a God who created us, a God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Faith in a God to whom we owe obedience for the very reason that we have been endowed with freedom to obey or disobey

I am sure that the faith-filled home in which Jesus grew to His full stature as a human person contributed greatly to shaping His vision for all our families and communities of Christian life. These should all be foyers of obedient faith, obedient hope and obedient love. That Joseph's obedience was lived in a setting that included others – and for reasons that concerned others – is all important. We live in a society which lacks a real sense of belonging – belonging to family and to community. We live in a society (if it can even be called that, at times) that advocates individuality and independence, and, as a result, so often fails to recognise the need for people to be in communion, living inter-dependently. The philosophy of our day preaches a false notion that obedience goes against freedom.

In contrast, the word of God teaches us, the more obedient we are to God the freer we are... and the more healthy our relationships with each other will be.

The truth is that when the fundamental relationship of obedience to God breaks down in our lives, then our relationships with others are also likely to become strained and even risk falling apart. Instead of working together along with and for others, we will find that we start to oppose and pull against others. Each one will start to paddle his or her own canoe. This can happen in families, in Religious and monastic communities, in Church. In all these settings we are plagued with the ill of individualism.

What I have just said – and throughout this morning's reflection – underlines the importance for us to listen to the Lord at all times and in every circumstance, and to listen to each other, wherever the Lord has called us to live our lives: in our married couple, our family, our community, or in wherever setting.

At this time, as Church, in our diverse Church communities, we are being called in a special way to listen to each other as we engage with the Synodal process. May St Joseph's example encourage us in this respect! Joseph was named Patron of the Universal Church by Pope John XXIII. The Good Pope John (as he was affectionately called by the people) clearly had a Synodal vision for the Church. May that same vision and spirit be ignited anew in our hearts at this time when we seek to listen to what the Spirit is saying in the Churches and to the Churches. (This is the great call and challenge to God's People in the Book of the Apocalypse.)

As we listen, our being grounded in love is all important. Humility remains a vital element to true listening. Ultimately, obedience will come from the heart... from our hearts responding to God's own loving heart. Ultimately, what obedience amounts to is our saying yes with our whole being to the infinite love of God, in a way that has our outward actions spring forth from, and be guided by, our hearts' inward, loving assent. Such was the case with Joseph. May such be the case with us.

Amen!