

Reflection for June 2021

Theme: **Obedience is never in vain**

Scripture Passage for meditation: Jn 14:15-21

There was once a very wise and eccentric Persian king named Abbas. He was respected and loved not only in his own kingdom but even by the neighbouring little kingdoms that surrounded his. All the people in his kingdom were happy but those who served him in his palace lacked nothing. No wonder, when the king needed a faithful servant, all the young men in the kingdom came to apply for the post. After many rigorous rounds of eliminations, there were finally only 2 young men who were eligible candidates for the office. So, the king took both at fixed wages.

His first order to them was a very strange one. It was to fill a basket with water from a neighbouring well. He also told them that he would come in the evening and see their work. They did this faithfully for a week. As promised, the king would pay them the amount decided at the end of each day. However, at the end of a week, one of the young men told his companion, "What is the good of doing this useless work? As soon as we put the water in one side it runs out the other." The other answered, "But we have our wages, haven't we? The use is the master's business, not ours."

"But this is simply idiotic! I am not going to do such fool's work," replied the other. Throwing down his bucket, he went away. The other man continued until he had exhausted the well; looking down into it he saw something shining—a diamond ring. "Now I see the use of pouring water into a basket," he cried. "If the bucket had brought up the ring before the well was emptied, it would have been found in the basket. Our work was not useless."

From the time of Creation, obedience has been the true test of love and faithfulness. Adam 'disobeyed' God, while Christ was 'obedient unto death, even the death on the cross.' No wonder among the three vows, obedience is usually regarded as the most difficult to follow, as it strikes at the very root of the first sin to be committed.

"if you love me, you will keep my commandments"

It really is that simple! Jesus puts it down in plain, lucid words. No parables, no lofty sermons that the disciples might wonder later what he could have meant. Love and obedience go hand in hand. "Obedience is for every Christian who is called to do God's will! For our Foundress Venerable Mother Veronica doing God's will at all costs was the central nucleus of the way of life she proposes, because she herself had always been obedient to God and to her own superiors who mediated God's will for her. Her entire life could be said to have unfolded according to the will of God. In one of her letters written a few years before her death she expresses this beautifully: "Yes, indeed, obedience is the chief corner stone of religious life. As for me, the nearer I am to the end the more I value and try to practice obedience." Above and beyond everything, it is obedience that characterizes the life of Mother Veronica and stands out like a precious jewel in her spirituality.

Interestingly there is only one word in Hebrew for obedience, 'shama', which means "to hear intelligently, to listen, to consent, to give heed, to perceive by ear, to understand.". The Greek word *hupakouo* expands the Hebrew meaning of the word obey. *Hupo* means "under, a place beneath, below," and denotes an inferior position. *Akouo* means "to hear, to understand." Thus together, *Hupakouo* means "to hear, listen attentively; to heed or conform to a command or authority." The difference between Hebrew and Greek perhaps lies more in the approach and is best understood with an illustration.

Three military men were standing on the deck of an aircraft carrier. Suddenly their commanding officer spotted an approaching missile. He shouted to them to "drop." Two of the men dropped to the deck. The third one looked around to see what the problem was. Just as he turned, the missile struck him, and he was killed. Herein lie the two philosophies of obedience. The Greek approach is to understand first and then obey. The soldier who turned around wanted to know why he should "drop"—and then he would decide whether to obey or not. The second approach is the Hebrew model— obey first, and then understand why. This is the method that God used in His training of Abraham when He asked him to leave his homeland and to offer up his son. On this basis the Scriptures are written so that every believer would obey God and then understand why. *'The faithful must believe the articles of the Creed "so that by believing they may obey God, by obeying may live well, by living well may purify their hearts, and with pure hearts may understand what they believe."' (CCC 2518)*

Many a time, in our religious life, we too might not understand why we are being sent to a place whose language, people or practices are alien to us, or given tasks that instead of nurturing our talents, gifts or natural abilities only seem to hamper them, why does someone younger, inexperienced, or unqualified get a better office, and the endless why's we ask ourselves never find an appropriate answer, instead they accumulate through the years causing confusion, dissatisfaction, frustration and bitterness. Perhaps like the two soldiers who simply dropped, or the young man who despite not understanding the purpose behind the king's command, filled the bucket anyway, there is peace and joy in obeying and *then* understanding the why and even if we may not ever know the 'why' we still have the satisfaction that comes from loving obedience.

"he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him..."

Fr Ronald Rolheiser reminds us, "Properly understood, [obedience is] not a missing out on real freedom. Rather it's a rich modality of freedom itself, one practised by Jesus (who repeatedly says: "I do nothing on my own. I do only the Father's will." Obedience, as a religious vow, is not an immature sacrificing of one's freedom and adulthood. It's rather a radical submitting of one's human ego - with all its wounds, desires, lusts, private ambitions, and envies - to something and Someone higher than oneself..." Our beloved Foundress could say: 'Obedience is my life.' Obedience to God's will is also the essence of life of the Apostolic Carmelites; God's will made known through the superiors, and through the daily choices made in discernment.

But this is a truth that the world cannot accept. The fact that it is obedience that brings true freedom, to the world, might seem a paradox at its best and an oxymoron at its worst. They cannot trade their free will for obedience, they cannot consider a world where poverty or chastity is upheld and lived out as a *choice*, leave alone an entire life of obedience! After all,

“the message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God.” And we must never forget the power that lies in this ‘counter- culture’ lifestyle we have chosen or the fact that we have another Advocate who helps us and who will be with us forever.

Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

Not only does Jesus expect us to keep His commandments, but He also gives us the secret for doing so. It is in His abiding in His Father that there is a oneness of Will and that is where his obedience flows from; and it is in our abiding in Him that we too will have that oneness of Will, from which our obedience will flow.

And so it is with us and our spiritual elders, superiors, religious authorities- as any other relationship, this one too is a Triangle, the closer two vertices move to the third, the closer they come to each other. The closer we move to the desire and sincerity of doing His Will, the closer will my superior and I be to each other. Obedience thus flows from our relationship with Him and therein with each other. As someone rightly said, ‘Obedience is a relationship between two “servants” who must both answer to God.’

In trusting the decisions made by elders we are truly trusting God’s will for us with the happy consolation given by our Lord to St. Teresa , ‘Daughter, obedience gives strength’. After all, obedience is affirming the truth that God gives direction and provision through those whom He has placed over our lives.

Questions for Reflection

1. Share in the community your thinking on the statement: ‘Obedience is the true test of love and faithfulness.’
2. What are my feelings when faced with a duty/ transfer that I am unwilling to follow?