

Sermon for Tuesday of Holy Week: obedience Mt 25.1-13

When my daughter Rebekah was 4 yrs old she asked her mother, “How do I find God?” You know my children always asked my wife profound theological questions, never me – strange – but anyway, how would you answer a four yr old? Well the Abbe de Tourville might answer “Rebekah, say to yourself God loves me beyond all I can imagine or put into words. Let this be the song of your whole being and become what you think when you think, especially when you think of God, and never let go of it. You will soon find this is the way to God”. On the other hand, if Rebekah was asking Dostoevsky or an Orthodox saint she might get a slightly different answer. Dostoevsky might say to her, “Rebekah, try to love those around you as much as you can. Love everyone. Love everything. Throw yourself on the ground even and kiss the earth and love it with unceasing, consuming, thankful love. And the more you love, the more you will find God”. Or consider the Russian Archbishop Anthony Bloom, who suggested once that the two royal routes to God are wonder and suffering. Assuming he would temper his remarks to a 4 yr old Anthony might say “Rebekah, consider what an amazing world God has provided for you, just for you, and while God will remain invisible to you you will begin to sense He is there, behind, beneath and around all His gifts to you”.

I mention all this because our theme tonight is obedience, which is related to the Latin word *oboedire*, meaning “to obey, pay attention to, give ear.” **Obedience** is the humility and discipline of discernment, to listen to the call of God’s presence in the people, things and circumstances of our life. And the recommendations to Rebekah just given could stand as attitudes and approaches by which we attend to the call of God’s presence. But for me, the very first thing that came to mind as an answer to Rebekah’s question was to suggest that sometimes, when we are very still and quiet, we can sense God is there, close by, but that we need to be very still to realise this. It echoes the Psalmist’s refrain, “be still and know that I am God”. One of the reasons for the gospel tonight is that the foolish virgins were not still, they had gone off busying themselves shopping for lamp oil. I like to think that if only they had been prepared to just sit and wait, in the shadows of the light given off by the wise virgins lamps, they would have got in to the wedding feast. But that would have taken humility, a willingness not to look quite as good as the other virgins so no, they went off to get equally equipped. Part of what is hard in waiting for Christ is waiting with our own sense of emptiness or felt inadequacy, but it is vital that we wait nonetheless and not go to seek to fill our own emptiness ourselves.

In Holy Week as we recall the events of Jesus’ passion we can see lots of individuals who came across Jesus but who were not prepared to receive him, to attend carefully to him, to be obedient. The reasons are various – Pilate perhaps because of a preoccupation with his job, keeping the peace and brokering a political solution to keep things stable and his record as governor unblemished. Caiaphas, the high priest, perhaps because of a preoccupation with his defence of the chosen people and their religion, seeing one man’s death as a necessary sacrifice to keep the Temple and its traditions secure. And so on. And we don’t do such characters justice if we take them as bad or malicious – they thought they were doing what they could in a difficult situation, motivated by what was most important to them, what in their eyes was “the good”. And that it seems to me is where one of the challenges of being prepared to be obedient to Jesus is rooted. We really must be willing to question what we regard as ultimately important, that which we uncritically accept as our treasure, that which we take for granted as ‘the good’. Pilate, Caiaphas and the others weren’t waiting for Christ,

they already had their Christ thank you very much, and when the Christ appeared they saw him simply in terms of whether he challenged or contributed to their treasure.

The gospel tonight is about waiting and the verb to wait, from the Latin *ad-tendere*, suggests a stretching towards, an “attention directed towards”, an active motion of our spirit in the direction of what it is we’re waiting for. And of course we get moulded by that for which we wait. Waiting for the first course to arrive in a restaurant I begin to get hungry, waiting for Bolton Wanderers game to begin, I get nervous, waiting for the Amazon book to arrive I get excited (I know, I need to get out more). We are moulded by that for which we wait. We are all waiting now, for the virus to pass, infections reduce, deaths to stop, and we must wait. We might do well to consider how our waiting can be baptised.

When Rebekah asked how she might find God there are lots of answers available but all of them involve a kind of waiting for God to appear, in the loving or being loved, in the gifts, in the stillness, a patient waiting on God to appear as and when God will. It’s easy to be sidetracked, distracted, diverted while we are waiting and yet it is essential to wait, and be moulded by the One for whom we wait. This is part of our obedience. We are impatient, we find this waiting difficult, we would prefer the reassurance of an experience, or the concrete sense of law-keeping, or the power of controlling God’s appearing. Sometimes even these strategies won’t suffice and we give up the waiting and instead grasp at whatever’s available.

It’s a tough call, to wait, to be obedient, to stay patiently with our incompleteness and hollowness without giving in to despair or temptation, waiting on our Lord’s arrival. And yet, it is precisely in this struggle that our Lord appears. He is there in the waiting, there in the desire to wait, there in the disappointment of not finding Him, there even in the unhappiness of unsatisfied desire, with us even while we are outside of ourselves. There in fact in the desire to know the answer to that question, “how do I find God?” When a 4 yr old asks a question like that you feel an unspoken pressure to give a simple, definitive answer. But we need to ensure our answers to that question are not too complete, not too tidy, not too cut and dried, because it was the cut and dried who were blind to our Lord and crucified Him when he appeared differently; no, we must keep that question open, and ourselves open, lamps trimmed, waiting patiently, obediently being moulded into the image of the One for whom we wait.