

31. October 2021

The proper listening

Mk 12:28-34

One of the scribes who had listened to them debating appreciated that Jesus had given a good answer and put a further question to him, 'Which is the first of all the commandments?' Jesus replied, 'This is the first: Listen, Israel, the Lord our God is the one, only Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You must love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.' The scribe said to him, 'Well spoken, Master; what you have said is true, that he is one and there is no other. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself, this is far more important than any burnt offering or sacrifice.' Jesus, seeing how wisely he had spoken, said, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' And after that no one dared to question him any more.

What a relief to hear in today's Gospel that at least one of the scribes was not closed to God, but agreed with Him on the essentials! The Lord even told him that he was not far from the Kingdom of God. Considering the very wise response of this scribe, we can hope that he came to recognise Jesus as his Lord and Messiah, and that therefore these words of Jesus were fulfilled in him: *"every scribe who becomes a disciple of the kingdom of Heaven is like a householder who brings out from his storeroom new things as well as old."* (Mt 13:52)

As we meditate on the first of the commandments, we see that, first of all, Israel is exhorted to listen. This is a very special kind of listening, which cannot be superficial; it is that attention which we pay to something that requires a special disposition on our part. It is a listening in which the heart and reason really want to understand and internalise what the Word of God is telling us. At the same time, this listening involves shutting ourselves off from anything that might distract us and steal our attention; anything that seeks to equate itself with the Word that comes from the mouth of God. All our 'wandering' thoughts have to be put aside, so that, if possible, nothing can hinder the Word of God from entering our heart.

For true listening, it is also important to have a sincere desire to understand, which implies a certain attitude of humility, which leads us to put ourselves below what we hear, without pretending that our own ideas have the same weight as what we have heard. This is especially true when the speaker really has something to say to us, and even more so, when it is the Word of God Himself. But also in any serious human conversation, this attitude of attentiveness and patience is necessary, so that we really try to understand what the other person wants to tell us before we interrupt him to present our own point of view.

We see, then, that knowing how to listen is a true art. This is why Sacred Scripture tells us: *"Remember this, my dear brothers: everyone should be quick to listen but slow to speak and slow to human anger"* (Jas 1:19).

If we have awakened in ourselves this disposition, the Word of God falls within us as an abundant blessing and spreads its light. Indeed, every commandment of God - and especially the first of them - is not only an exhortation to live rightly, but also carries within itself the grace and light to be able to act in accordance with what the commandment demands. So the Word is not far from us; it is close to our heart (cf. Rom 10:8), it corresponds to our innermost being and reminds us of a profound truth, which we may have forgotten or erased from our conscience.

The scribe in today's Gospel gives us an example of this listening attitude. The Lord's response moved him to the depths of his being, confirming what he had already recognised in his relationship with God. He had been attentive before, and the encounter he now has with Jesus corroborates that certainty he had within himself and according to which he tried to live. This man was not far from the Kingdom of Heaven, and at that moment he experienced a mutual recognition in the truth.

Now it is a matter of putting the Lord's commandment into practice with all our heart, of letting ourselves be guided by Him, of getting to know Him better and better and of giving to our neighbour the love that we also show to ourselves, or, better still, the love with which God loves us.

The scribe's answer is a guide for us: for God the giving of our heart is more important than any sacrifice or effort we make, even if these too are valuable and fruitful. He wants us to accept His love and return it. This is the greatest grace: to be able to hear and understand how God shows us His love, and then to learn to meet our neighbour and ourselves in this love.

If we acquire a "disciple's ear", we will be able to recognise more and more this love, which is the foundation of our existence. *"Morning by morning he [the Lord Yabweh] makes my ear alert to listen like a disciple."* (Isa 50:4)

Every person is called to have this decisive encounter with God, and every person is created in His image and likeness (Gen 1:27), however marred that image may be. When one encounters this fundamental truth, one can find the way back home, to one's true home, which one had lost because of original sin and its consequences.

But we must also meditate on this first commandment from God's perspective: He longs for us humans to fulfil it, so that He can give us all that He has prepared for us. If we stray from our path, we remain in darkness and live as in the "shadow of death" (cf. Lk 1:79); while God's love seeks every possibility to touch us with His light.