

19. May 2022

Listening to God

Acts 15:7-21

After a long discussion, Peter stood up and addressed them. 'My brothers,' he said, 'you know perfectly well that in the early days God made his choice among you: the gentiles were to learn the good news from me and so become believers. And God, who can read everyone's heart, showed his approval of them by giving the Holy Spirit to them just as he had to us. God made no distinction between them and us, since he purified their hearts by faith. Why do you put God to the test now by imposing on the disciples the very burden that neither our ancestors nor we ourselves were strong enough to support? But we believe that we are saved in the same way as they are: through the grace of the Lord Jesus.' The entire assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul describing all the signs and wonders God had worked through them among the gentiles. When they had finished it was James who spoke. 'My brothers,' he said, 'listen to me. Simeon has described how God first arranged to enlist a people for his name out of the gentiles. This is entirely in harmony with the words of the prophets, since the scriptures say: After that I shall return and rebuild the fallen hut of David; I shall make good the gaps in it and restore it. Then the rest of humanity, and of all the nations once called mine, will look for the Lord, says the Lord who made this known so long ago. 'My verdict is, then, that instead of making things more difficult for gentiles who turn to God, we should send them a letter telling them merely to abstain from anything polluted by idols, from illicit marriages, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has always had his preachers in every town and is read aloud in the synagogues every Sabbath.'

Based on what they recognise as God's will, the apostles come to a far-reaching conclusion and make a decision that will be fundamental for the way of the Church: *"My brothers,' he said, 'you know perfectly well that in the early days God made his choice among you: the gentiles were to learn the good news from me and so become believers."*

This decision was preceded by a heated discussion. The overriding question was how to proceed with the Gentiles who had believed in Christ: were they to be inserted into the tradition of Israel, practising all the prescriptions and obligations that would entail, or could they have 'direct access' to God, without that? This was a crucial point for the whole Church! Thanks to the apostles, who were not intimidated by those who initially disagreed, the new faithful coming from the pagan world were granted a direct path to God.

The apostles' argumentation is very convincing, and indicates how attentive they were to God's action. He himself had called the Gentiles, had given them the Holy Spirit and had purified their hearts through faith. As the apostle James testifies in front of the assembly, this action of God was in accordance with the prophecies of Holy Scripture. Thus, they were able to make the right decision.

This decision will mark the future path of the Church, which is called to understand and interpret God's action, especially with regard to mission. We see that the apostles and their successors, as well as all the people of God, are co-workers of the Holy Spirit, who is the first evangeliser. Therefore, the key to a fruitful mission consists in listening to the Holy Spirit.

Indeed, this listening is the key for all the faithful, whether it be to know God more deeply, to grow spiritually or to fulfil the mission entrusted to us Christians. It is the Holy Spirit who reminds us of all that Jesus said and did (cf. Jn 14:26). He is the living reminder of the Lord, so that we can imitate him in the concrete situations of our lives.

In this context, it is useful to recall the means by which the Holy Spirit speaks to us, but without going into them exhaustively:

- a) **The Holy Spirit speaks through the Word of God**, which the Church has handed down to us. By listening to and attentively receiving this divine word, we will

become "accustomed" to the voice of the Holy Spirit, so to speak, and our ears will become more and more open.

- b) **The Holy Spirit speaks through the authentic Magisterium of the Church**, which has the task of "proclaiming to men what they really are and reminding them of what they ought to be before God" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2036).
- c) **The Holy Spirit speaks in our own hearts.** The more we are united to the Lord, the more clearly we will be able to understand him. However, certain criteria of discernment are required in order to distinguish his voice and not to be led into error, primarily concordance with Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church.
- d) **The Holy Spirit also speaks through other faithful**, although in this case he applies the same criteria mentioned above, in order to make the proper discernment of spirits.

There would be much to say about the way in which the Holy Spirit communicates to us, particularly when He speaks to us interiorly. He always respects man's freedom. Thus, He convinces and does not manipulate; He invites and does not compel; He creates spiritual order and not disorder; He does not shout, but acts gently in the heart; He does not know lies or pretend, but is truthful.

At a time when confusion is spreading more and more in human society, and unfortunately also in the Church, it becomes even more important to listen to the Holy Spirit, to distinguish truth from error and lies, and to recognise how He wants to counteract this confusion, so that also today the message of the Gospel, which is still as valid as it was two thousand years ago, is proclaimed.