

12. January 2023

If only you would listen to him today!

Hb 3, 7-14

*That is why, as the Holy Spirit says: If only you would listen to him today! Do not harden your hearts, as at the rebellion, as at the time of testing in the desert, when your ancestors challenged me, and put me to the test, and saw what I could do for forty years. That was why that generation sickened me and I said, 'Always fickle hearts, that cannot grasp my ways!' And then in my anger I swore that they would never enter my place of rest. Take care, brothers, that none of you ever has a wicked heart, so unbelieving as to turn away from the living God. Every day, as long as this today lasts, keep encouraging one another so that none of you is hardened by the lure of sin, because we have been granted a share with Christ only if we keep the grasp of our first confidence firm to the end.*

"If only you would listen to him today!".... His voice, the voice of the Lord, must be distinguished from many other voices that want to penetrate us, voices that are not of the Holy Spirit, voices that want to whisper to us something other than what the Lord is telling us.

There is a veritable "loudmouth" in this world, especially if we take into account the "omnipresence" of the media. If we do not know how to handle the modern means of communication properly today, we will suffer from a kind of persecution of all kinds of voices. It is sad to see how people can be so immersed in their smartphones that they become addicted to them, so how can they hear the voice of the Lord, if it is stifled in such a way?

But God continues to speak to us and always wants us to pay attention to him, for his voice is life and truth. "*The voice of the Lord is powerful*" - as the psalm says (Ps 28:4). His voice resounds in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. Everything He does and says is the authentic voice of God, who for our sake became man in the Person of Jesus. That is why we can also perceive his voice every time we read Holy Scripture, when we try to interiorise it and live according to it. The voice of the Lord also resounds in the Church, when she authentically interprets and actualises Christ's legacy.

Today's reading speaks to us of a hardening of the heart, which makes us incapable of recognising the voice of the Lord. But how can the heart be hardened? The text itself answers us, giving us a concrete example from the Bible: some of the people of Israel rebelled against God in the desert because of their unbelief and discontent, even though they themselves had witnessed the marvellous way in which He had saved His people time and again.

This example shows us something essential: even though God brings benefits to mankind, people can close their hearts to Him. Let us also remember the examples in the New Testament. In so many ways Jesus shows His love to mankind, yet how easily they deny Him or even betray Him!

We see, then, that the problem lies in ourselves, in our human heart, which often wants something other than what God wants. When our desires demand something that does not please God, when our greed clings to things, then we are capable of forgetting God or putting Him aside in order to satisfy our own desires. At such times we prefer not to be very interested in what God would say about the situation. In this way, we can become more and more deaf to the voice of the Lord in the concrete situation.

Today's reading also shows us another point that can harden our hearts and close us to the voice of God: it is the deceitfulness of sin. When we make room for sin, when it takes deeper and deeper root in us, then our heart becomes hardened and is no longer willing to listen to the voice of the Lord. We can get to the point where we even flee from His voice, as our heart becomes more and more mournful. This is an excellent opportunity for the Devil to "definitely" harden our heart to God. For this person there would be no hope left, were it not for the fact that God's desire to save us is greater than the malice of the devil, who would not willingly let go of his prey.

Now, how can we avoid closing ourselves to the Will of God, how can we always be open to listen to His voice?

First of all, there is gratitude, which helps us not to forget God. If we remember His works, both those we find narrated in the Bible and those that He has done in our personal lives, then we will remember God also in difficult times and we will not so quickly lose faith, as happened to some Israelites in the desert.

A second important element so that our hearts do not close is the constant contact with God through prayer, the sacraments, the interiorisation of Holy Scripture, good works, and so on.

And in today's reading we find a third aspect. We are recommended, as brothers and sisters, to take care of each other, to admonish each other so that no one strays from the path. We can also call this "correctio fraterna". Each of us is his brother's keeper (cf. Gen 4:9)! Not only will we be held accountable for ourselves, but we have also been entrusted with our brother. In this context, of course, we refer in the first instance to those who believe in Christ.

Finally a last remark about the unbelieving heart, which is also mentioned in today's reading. We can ask the Lord for the transformation of our heart. But this implies that we co-operate, so that all those inclinations that keep us bound to ourselves can be torn away from within us. We have to learn to perceive very carefully what is going on in the depths of our heart, and to open up to God everything in us that does not correspond to His will.

The strong passage we have read and meditated on today should not discourage us; rather it should remind us that we cannot feel strong and secure. As long as we live on earth we will always be exposed to temptation. False self-confidence can do as much harm as, at the other extreme, excessive scrupulousness. The right attitude is watchfulness towards God and towards our neighbour, especially towards our fellow believers, and also towards ourselves. If we engrave this in our hearts, we will not lose confidence and, at the same time, we will remain vigilant so that neither we nor others turn away from the living God.