

Homily for the 2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time 2024 Year B

“Speak Lord your servant is listening.”

If you think about it there are two fundamental ways that we can approach God in prayer.

Like Samuel, we could say, “Speak Lord your servant is listening”, but, for the most part, it is more a matter of, “Listen Lord your servant is speaking.” For most people prayer is understood as a process whereby we speak to God; the possibility of God speaking to us does not enter into it.

We have all heard the old joke, “How is it that when we speak to God it is called prayer, but when God speaks to us it is called schizophrenia”?

There seems to be a real deep-down fear that people who actually claim to hear God speaking to them in prayer are nuts, off the wall, or in need of special care and attention.

And truth to tell they sometimes are. One must be very careful about believing too readily individuals who claim to hear voices, and that one of those voices is the voice of God.

But God does speak to us. The notion of God speaking to us must be properly understood, because He speaks to us in different and diverse ways.

Before anything else at all, it is no good in Him speaking to us unless we ourselves are disposed to receive the voice of God.

God cannot speak to us whilst we are speaking to Him, so if we have not got it already, we should have the ability, once we have said what we want to say to God, to try to be still, quiet, silent, and listen and be attentive to the voice of God.

In that stillness we invite God to speak to us, “Speak lord your servant is listening.”

When we tell God that we are listening what we should mean by that is not just that we are waiting to hear what God has to say to us, but also that we are waiting to receive what God has to say to us. We must listen attentively with our ears and our hearts.

Let us be quite clear about what is involved in hearing the voice of God. How does God speak to us?

One thing that we most certainly do not hear is the sound of a voice speaking to us. God is more subtle than that. God communicates a sense of His presence and His will to us in different ways. If we are open and attentive to, God can speak to us very profoundly in the beauty and power of nature.

Sit quietly watching a beautiful sunset, or peer into the countless galaxies of stars in the night sky, and you will experience God speaking wordlessly in your heart. Quietly watch a newborn baby as it sleeps or listen to a favourite piece of music. All are experiences too deep for words, and after them one is conscious that whilst nothing has been said, something certainly has been heard. If we are attentive God speaks wordlessly to our hearts in the subtlety and beauty of such profound experiences.

He speaks to us also in the revealed word of God, when we read or listen to the scriptures, especially the teachings of Christ in the Gospels. Words are spoken, and they echo down through the centuries, to open for us the mind and heart of God expressed through the person of Christ, His Son. It is part of a good spiritual life to try to put aside a few minutes each day, surround yourself with solitude and silence, and just read a few lines from maybe one of the Psalms or the Gospels and then listen to what it has to say to you.

We pray, “God give us this day Our Daily Bread”, but for the most part we deliberately neglect to nourish ourselves with the bread of God's word. Christ castigates those in the Gospels who “Have eyes that they cannot see, have ears but they cannot hear”. Our lack of attentiveness to God speaking to us and within us is more laziness and bad habit rather than malice, but it is something we should attend to.

Let us assume as part of our prayer life we begin to leave room for God to speak to us wordlessly in the silence of our hearts.

You will find that your appetite for this sort of prayer will grow, and that your personal faith deepens and becomes more alive.

It is as though, when distance separates you for a time from someone you love, that even just a few written lines from that person is enough to sustain and deepen that love; that every time you quietly read those lines different layers of meaning reveal themselves to you.

But the one drawback about this type of prayer is that perhaps in your heart you can hear what is being said, but in your mind you misunderstand or mistake the meaning.

Two people can read reflectively a few short lines from one of the Gospels and such is the complexity and diversity of the human mind they could come away with totally different meanings. It is possible to listen to God and miss hear what He has to say.

How can we safeguard ourselves from that?

I do not think that you can. It is a sort of risk that each of us must take, that whenever we try to interpret or understand something, it is us that is doing it. With our own background, education, hopes, fears, anxieties, and expectations and all those colours that I interpret, what I hear when I try to attentively listen to the voice of God.

Perhaps there is one safe test that we can apply and always should. God must always be utterly self-consistent in his goodness. He cannot act against nor contradict Himself. If when we listen attentively for the voice of God in our hearts and come up with ideas and interpretations that are immoral, sinful, cruel, irrational, or even murderous, then that is most certainly not the voice of God that we hear.

No matter how sincere they are, far too many people attempt to justify sinful actions by claiming they were inspired and supported by the will of God, God tells them to do these things. If the nature of the thought or act is evil, then its origin is evil as well.

That first reading ends by telling us that Samuel let's know word of God full to the ground. So many of the words the God speaks quietly to each one of us in our hearts do fall to the ground and are wasted because we haven't the habit in our lives of a regular openness and attentiveness to listen to the voice of God.

If that reading can teach us anything at all, it is this, that prayer is a dialogue, it is a two-way thing, we speak, and God speaks. If we expect God to listen to us, then God too expects us to listen to Him, to all those wordless subtle movements in our minds and our hearts that find their origin in Him.

So, there is perhaps a good New Year's resolution, a little bit less of "Listen Lord your servant is speaking", and perhaps a little more now and then of "Speak Lord your servant is listening."