

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 29, 2012

Some years ago it was common enough for cultural psychologists to speak of a “depersonalized” society, a “face in the crowd,” a number without a face. Today, though, we rejoice in an eclectic universe. We inhabit a diversified, worldwide network, expanding in countless different directions each day. We take for granted being one of the many in a global world. Mass communications are seemingly limitless in their many resources, from offering the latest gadget, to investment portfolios on developing countries.

Yet, despite our modern advances, the biblical authors have a lasting message. They want us to take a look at this vast array of voices that our society offers us by posing a simple yet vital question: Where is the singular voice of the Lord, the sound of *genuine* authority in our lives? The worried, preoccupied heart, as Paul reminds us today, is also the divided, even untrusting, heart. Hearts divided are less free to listen to the voice of the Lord; or worse, they become hardened.

We see the predicament of a stone heart over and over again in Israel’s wandering in the desert. These ancient people mirror our own community, at times collapsed in on itself with its self-concerns. Go to any large city – or even small towns these days – and you will often find people feverish to scramble to their next destination. And, indeed, is there anyone that has not felt pressured to drive the kids to the tenth activity of the day; run to the grocery store for dinner; and accomplish the vast array of activities in between that make up our busy lives? Taken together, these activities represent busy people, often losing touch not only with their roots but with a sense of purpose. We face today a cultural dissonance and numerous distractions that cloud and blur the clean voice of truth. The Psalmist tells the people of Israel and tells us, “If today you hear God’s voice, harden not your hearts.” Interestingly enough, the demon we encounter in the Gospel is noisy, full of talk – and multiple. Here, of course, we are reminded of our own anxious world. The demon is multi-tasking! And what is the first thing that Jesus tells the demon? “Quiet!”

Pope Benedict XVI in his message for World Communications Day tells us “When messages and information are plentiful, silence becomes essential if we are to distinguish what is important from what is insignificant or secondary.” The Holy Father says “In silence we are better able to listen to and understand ourselves. Ideas come to birth and acquire depth. We understand with greater clarity what it is we want to say and what we expect from others, and we choose how to express ourselves.”

Isn't this the place where we want to meet the Lord and listen to the sound of his voice? Isn't silence something we long for? The remedy for all this noise, according to Jesus, is obedience and the surrender of a stony heart into silent trust. A trusting person is open to others. A trusting person listens. A trusting person knows where the voice of the Lord really is.

All this wrestling with our lack of trust and surrender to God is not easy. Years ago we lived in a Christian milieu that was much slower. Undoubtedly there were other demons then. But we must face our own difficulties squarely as they arise, and bring them in silence before the Lord and God's healing power. Religious people and practices are not exempt from stony hearts.

As Christians, we are always reduced to a simple, single word: Jesus. Even now, Jesus comes to break Word and Sacrament with us, not to destroy. He appears in our midst not to eradicate our lives, but to purify and liberate. That newness will be ours if we listen to the voice that is deep within us, not the many voices that tell us what to be, or where to go, but the single voice of the one who loves us beyond all knowing. That voice is upon us all and has come to set us free. Let's allow Jesus in silent prayer to free us from what binds us and to liberate us forever.

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