

THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING

Transcription of talk by Sr. Gill Goulding from the Virtual Vocations Fair held in February 2021 at Newman Centre.

Listening seems to be such a simple process. We do it every day though there is so much to listen to - friends, family, classmates, teachers, you are listening to me now. We are so accustomed to listening that we use earbuds as we listen to music or one another. Immersed as we so often are in so many works, by the internet, the social broadcasts, the social media, now countless zoom meetings, we run the risk of becoming deaf to God's word in our hearts. Pope Francis in one of his morning Mass homilies in 2017 suggested that it could be useful to dedicate a day for listening. We recently celebrated on the 24th of January the Sunday of the Word of God. Following from this the day of listening might be a good idea. And today, Pope Francis instituted a new memorial in the liturgical calendar – the month of Mary and Lazarus, because he said they listened attentively to the words of Jesus. Mary and Joseph are also examples of people who listened deeply to the Word of God.

Why would we listen to God? We need God's Word so that we can hear amidst the thousands of other words in our daily lives that one word that speaks to us not about things, but about life. Listening is about relationship. We know this from our own experience of listening to friends. Listening to God is a more profound experience. It is turning our attention to the God who loved us into being and who desires to draw us into fullness of life. This listening is at the heart of prayer. When we turn our attention to God in prayer, we find that we begin to notice our own loving desire for communion of life with this God who so passionately loves us beyond anything we can imagine and who loved us before we came into being. It is God's initiative at the heart of our creation and this love of God for us is transformative.

As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI stated, 'God's love transforms all of life. It is a love that is limitless and that precedes us, that sustains us and calls us along the



path of life. A love rooted in an absolutely free gift of God. In the light of such a love, I really want to listen to what God has to say. *But how do we listen?*

Well, we should surely need to stop and listen. Stop in order to listen. But stop what? Well, we cannot listen if we are trying to do other things at the same time. I know it may seem cool to multitask all the time, but listening to God is one task above and beyond all others and needs full attention. So yes, you do need to turn your phone off. It is important to find a quiet space and silence is an enormous help in this listening enterprise. Why do we do these difficult things? Because the benefit of such listening is that it enables us to be receptive in our relationship with God. We come to prayer in order to listen and in our listening God enables a deeper relationship with us.

Prayer with scripture, meditation, Lectio Divina, liturgical prayer, Mass (even virtually, at the moment) and the sacraments of Reconciliation, spiritual reading and other forms of prayer – they all need this desire for a relationship with God. It is important to realize that this desire for God is part of our original creation already present within our hearts. Cardinal Newman used to speak of this: 'Though at times the cry of this desire may be buried under the weight of busyness, it is always aligned deep within us. When it remains unfulfilled, our hearts know that something important is missing.'

.....Continued on page 17

THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING (cont'd)

.....Continued from page 7

As the psalmist writes, 'O God, you are my God, for you I long, for you my soul is thirsting.' So this desire to listen to God and to enter a relationship with Him, is the most natural thing in the world. It is attending to the One who loves us with a passion beyond comprehension, who sustains us with an inexhaustible supply of grace, who has promised that we shall never be left alone neither in the darkest or lightest of times, who gives us a vocation and who draws us always to a fullness of life.

The more I am open to listening prayerfully each day, the more I become aware of God's continual giving to me in so many ways throughout the day. Through events and my interactions with people, I become aware of the presence of God throughout the day. So I become adept at recognizing His voice. *But how do I know it is God's voice and not my imagination or something else?* Practice over time helps. There is a certain quality and resonance to the voice of God in the depths of our hearts that we come to recognize. It is also a very good idea and one that many saints have suggested, that as we come to prayer we ask the Holy Spirit to open our hearts and minds to whatever the Lord might be wanting to say to us. It is God who draws us to the desire to listen and to pray and God is always faithful. But it is also important to have someone to walk this path of verbal listening with you. We tend to use the term spiritual director, I think the French have a better way of putting it – the one who accompanies. Pope Francis has made it very clear that he thinks it is very important that young people be accompanied by someone with wisdom and discernment who walks with them helping them to listen more deeply to the voice of the Lord at work within their lives.

This is at the heart of discernment of vocation. Every specific vocation is born of the initiative of God. It is the gift of the love of God. He is the one who takes the first step because of the presence of His own love wrapped into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. So to summarize the practicalities: Listening of this kind is about entering into a relationship with God. It is about



prayer. To facilitate such listening, I need to give quality time – time when I am fully awake. I need to leave aside other tasks and especially my own. It is good to have a quiet place where I can be silent. I may prepare for my listening by reading some scripture – the Gospel of that day's Mass could be helpful. As I come to such a prayerful listening time, it is important to ask the Holy Spirit to help me to be attentive and open to what the Lord might want to say to me. And then we wait upon God's timing. Just like Simeon in the Gospel who had been waiting a long time to see Jesus. We come with reverence to the Lord and at the end of our time, we leave with reverence. Perhaps by saying the Glory Be or another prayer. We begin and conclude remembering this is a relationship – the most important relationship in which we shall be engaged. Finding a wise person who is able to accompany us in our prayerful listening and discerning of our vocation is most helpful.

Let me give the last word to St Augustine: *'To seek God is the greatest adventure and to find God, the greatest human achievement.'*

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