

I have to be honest and admit that when I first saw the list of topics for the Lent addresses this year and spotted my name next to obedience – I wasn't filled with joy. Alongside topics like prayer and humility, obedience just doesn't sound that exciting. Whereas humility might conjure images of noble and worthy living, obedience suggests (at least to me) something closer to oppression and subjugation.

But it's important that we don't just go with our first impressions! And after giving it some thought, I realised it was quite a privilege to be asked to talk about obedience in this Lenten season. Because frankly without obedience, we wouldn't be sat here this evening! I don't simply mean obedience to come and sit in the pews on a Sunday evening. Much more than that: I mean that without obedience, the roots of our faith, our very salvation and this Crooked Spire would not exist.

I do understand that's quite a big claim to make. So allow me to provide some context. The marks of obedience can be spotted throughout scripture. Beginning in creation, humankind's first interaction with God in the garden is marred by a failure of obedience. Temptation is succumbed to and leads to the Fall. Later on after the Exodus, when God's people wandered in the wilderness for forty years, they fell prey to the worship of idols – yet another failure of obedience to God. And in stark contrast to His people, the God of the Hebrew scriptures is the model of obedience. He remains the God of an unbreakable covenant, who welcomes back his people again and again. As the conclusion of the Torah declares: "Today I am offering you life and prosperity, death and disaster. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I am laying down for you today, if you love the Lord your God and follow his ways, if you keep his commandments, his laws and his customs, you will live [...]. Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live." In the roots of our faith, obedience is the offer of life itself.

This of course reaches its climax in the life and death of Jesus. As the theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg described it: “Christ’s death should not be first understood as an unselfish turning to us, though it is that also. Rather, it is primarily an expression of the self-giving of the Son to the Father in an obedience that desires nothing for self but serves totally the glorifying of God and the coming of his kingdom.” Christ’s death, the source of our salvation, is cast as an act of obedience. This is exactly what St Paul describes in his letter to the Philippians when he writes: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.”

If Christ’s death is to be seen as an act of loving obedience, then we can say that obedience is a part of the very nature of God and the Incarnation. So... obedience is important. But what on earth does that mean in your life or mine? Well the first question to ask is, who am I obedient to? And we need only hear those words of Christ to Philip read this evening: ‘Follow me.’ Christian obedience is to follow Christ. Pretty simple stuff.

Of course, once you introduce complications like community life and all of the joys that living alongside fellow Christians can bring... it becomes less simple! But that is the specific situation into which Benedict writes when he says: “As soon as any order has been given by a superior, as being the same as if the order were divinely given, they can brook no delay in carrying it out.”

That might sound strange or excessively strict to our ears; sat here not in a religious community but as members of a parish church congregation. Yet a fair bit of what we do bears resemblance to it.

After all, we are obedient to our bishops. Ignatius of Antioch, way back in the second century, wrote to the Christians in Ephesus exhorting them to unity. And just as

Benedict wrote (concerning Abbots) centuries later, Ignatius implored believers to look upon the bishop as if they were the Lord themselves. Not to make the bishop feel like a king, but for the sake of order in the service of word and sacrament. As he wrote of himself as bishop, Ignatius said “I do not issue orders to you, as if I were some great person. For though I am bound for the name of Christ, I am not yet perfect in Jesus Christ. For now I begin to be a disciple, and I speak to you as fellow disciples with me... But inasmuch as love suffers me not to be silent in regard to you, I have therefore taken upon me first to exhort you that you would all run together in accordance with the will of God.” Like St Paul, Ignatius calls upon the athletic imagery of running a race, together with all believers. The point being, we are all running in the same direction and towards the same finish line. Whether in a parish or a religious community, we can all make sense of that.

I preached this morning on the Second Isaiah reading, with its description of the covenant banquet which awaits God’s people. Wine, milk and rich food in abundance – all without cost. And I asked the congregation to think about when they might have tried to put an entry price on God’s kingdom or excluded certain types of people from the heavenly banquet. My point was that we don’t control who receives an invite, we can only wholeheartedly accept our own. And really, that’s all about obedience too.

Whereas the best way for Jews to show love and obedience to God was by following the presumed 613 commandments, we as followers of Christ are simply asked to love God and love our neighbour. No ifs or buts; we are to love those who, just like us, have received an invitation to the banquet. That’s why Benedict speaks not just of obedience to the abbot, but of a mutual obedience in the community. As Rowan Williams wrote “Novice and senior monk are ‘obeying’ one another if they are attending with discernment to one another, and the habits that shape their lives are

habits of listening, attention and the willingness to take seriously the perspective of the other, the stranger.”

So I hope that I’ve made a case for obedience this evening. Not as a binding and restrictive concept, but as something that actually frees us. Something that helps us to prepare for the heavenly banquet, in this life. Obedience as communion, obedience as running together the race set before us, obedience as safeguarding the unity of word and sacrament.

I want to end with something that befits the Crooked Spire, with its important musical tradition. It comes from Clement of Alexandria, writing about the church as a symphony. He wrote: “The union of many in one, issuing in the production of divine harmony out of a medley of sounds and division, becomes one symphony following one choir-leader and teacher, the Word, reaching and resting in the same truth, and crying Abba, Father. This, the true utterance of His children, God accepts with gracious welcome--the first-fruits He receives from them.”

My friends - in obedience, may we become one symphony, following Christ the one conductor, that we may produce a divine harmony worthy of God the Father.

Amen.