

Good Friday '17
April 14, 2017
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“Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” (Heb. 5:8-9)

“Son though he was”. Who is this “Son” that the Letter to the Hebrews is talking about? Earlier, in chapter one, he is described as the son through whom God created the universe, who is the radiance of God's glory and the imprint of His being, who sustains all things by his mighty word. (Heb. 1:2-3) This is the eternal Son of God, Who is God. Which might, then, raise a question-- how could God learn obedience, or be made perfect through suffering? Well, through his incarnation. The Son of God learned obedience by becoming a human being. This does not mean that he was disobedient before. It means that in his human nature he experienced the necessity of obedience.

Now when we say “be obedient” we may think of slavish compliance with the dictates of another, who may or may not have our best interests at heart. But God has our best interests at heart. To be obedient to our Creator is to comply with a way of life that fulfills our purpose in being created, and leads to eternal happiness. As the Preface of the Eucharistic Prayer expresses it, “It is our duty and our salvation”.

In his human nature, the Son of God experienced all the weaknesses and temptations to which we are subject. He had to keep being obedient to the Father's will-- which is love-- just as much as we do. More than we do, because he became a man not just for himself alone, but so that by his obedient love the whole human race could come to eternal happiness. The disobedience of one man, Adam, brought misery and death. The obedience of one man, Jesus Christ, brought life.

We meet in the passion narratives of the Gospels lots of disobedience.

Take Pontius Pilate. He was the Roman governor of Palestine, which Rome had conquered, held captive by force, and was milking through taxation. When the light came into the world, how did Pilate react? At trial he seemed eager to release Jesus, but we also read that the crowd that arrested Jesus in the garden included soldiers commanded by a tribune. These would have been Roman military. Pilate was known to be ruthless in governing, little concerned about things like truth or justice. He dismissed Jesus with a jesting remark-- “What is truth?” Pilate's primary concern was heading off trouble, and Jesus was stirring up enough popular excitement to attract his attention.

So why did Pilate seem so eager to release Jesus? Perhaps to deflect the anger of Jesus'

supporters. Get rid of the troublemaker and pin the blame on the Sanhedrin. But perhaps also his pagan superstition kicked in after interviewing the prisoner, and getting the note from his wife to have nothing to do with that just man. She had suffered greatly in a dream because of him.

Pilate represents secular rulers in disobedience to God-- ruthless, cynical, violent, superstitious.

Then there were the chief priests and other opponents of Jesus. The temple aristocracy owed their position to the Romans, so they supported the status quo. Despite their own prophets they refused to consider the possibility that Jesus was the one expected. Despite their own Law and the variety of acceptable rabbinic interpretations, they denied Jesus his interpretation.

They made up their minds against him not on the evidence but because believing and obeying would be too disruptive and costly to them personally. They had already closed their minds against him. So when the High Priest commanded him before God to say whether or not he was the messiah, his positive response was taken as perjury. That was his blasphemy-- calling God to support a lie.

The chief priest and his supporters represent religious rulers in disobedience to God – self-serving, hypocritical, betraying their sacred responsibilities to God as shepherds of His flock.

And then there were the disciples and other followers of Jesus. What did they want in a messiah? Deliverance from all the hardships of life. They, like their leaders, saw in Jesus what they wanted to see. When he fed them all with multiplied loaves and fishes they were ready to carry him off to make him king. As long as he was healing and raising from the dead, they were all ready to march with him on Jerusalem. When his arrest made it clear that his agenda was not their own, they melted away. The hosannas of Palm Sunday were abandoned on Good Friday.

The disciples and other followers represent us in disobedience to God: when we create God in our image, accept the comforting parts of the gospel and reject the hard parts, when we require proof before responding to grace, when we adjust our religious practice to fit our lifestyle instead of the other way around.

The passion narratives are full of disobedient characters, and they are still around today. The obedience of Jesus rebukes us all. But if we swallow our pride and accept the rebuke we come to find that the cross of Christ is more than a rebuke. It is proof of God's great compassion for his wayward children, that he would go to that length to save us. And on the third day it becomes proof that love, though it suffers when it confronts evil in this

world, triumphs. And then, in the unleashing of the Holy Spirit, it is proof that the disobedient can become obedient, sinners can become saints, and it is possible for any of us to inherit the divine life for which he redeemed the world.