

22nd Sunday Ordinary Time Year “B”

August 28-29, 2021

Readings: Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8ff.

At the outset today, before I begin my primary remarks, let us pray for our brave service men and women who, given the nature of their orders, are working under the most difficult of circumstances to assist as many people as possible to leave Afghanistan safely. May we never tire– not even for a moment– of praying for them in these crucial days ahead. We also pray for all impacted by Hurricane Ida along the gulf coast.

“Humbly welcome the word that has taken root in you, with its power to save you.” These words from this week’s epistle of St. James serve as a beautiful reminder of how blessed we are as Christians to be guided by the power of the Word of God. James states that the Word of God has power to save us, if we but act on it. If all we do listen, what good is that?

Echoed in the first reading, similar advice abounds. Observe the decrees and commandments enjoined upon you, thus giving evidence of your wisdom and intelligence. Two themes surface today—**listen and observe**.

It is not easy to become an effective listener. If we are honest, we have all been in conversations during which our mind is anywhere else but the conversation at hand. Our mind wanders, the head is nodding, but in reality, we are somewhere else. Or, we may be in a group speaking, and suddenly we hear our name spoken.

Our auditory cortex sorts out different sounds and we recognize our name in a crowd. Up to then, it was a jumble of words in someone else’s conversation, but we hear our name as if it was shouted out. Known as the **cocktail party effect**, a listener can focus on a conversation amidst dozens of others occurring all around. This simple example from science can easily be applied to the spiritual life. How are we listening? We do not hear God speaking to us in the sense that you and I would converse.

While it is not audible, this does not mean that the Lord is not speaking. He certainly is, but we need to shut out all the competing voices, in order for the His voice to be heard.

So, what can we do? If you read the readings prior to Sunday Mass, then you will not be hearing them for the first time. A challenging sound system, a crying baby, a momentary distraction—all these things can get in the way of properly hearing in the first place.

Before you pray, take a moment of quiet to rid all distractions; do not immediately launch into a prayer; clear the deck first! Since prayer is an operation of the practical intellect under the direction of the will, by its very nature it requires attention. Besides listening, we must also observe.

When we observe the commandments of God, we are keeping our part of the covenant. He is our God, and we are His people. We must keep our word to God by observing his commandments. They are neither too lofty, nor too difficult. God does not command the impossible. We need to stay focused. We mustn't be distracted by all that swirls around us.

Distractions in prayer can be either voluntary or involuntary, external or internal. No matter how much we try, we cannot avoid them. We can, however, stretch our attention span. Force yourself, if necessary, to be quiet for a period of time. Experiment with turning off the car radio while driving, even if occasionally. Do not fall into the trap of thinking that you absolutely need background noise while working or studying.

Causes of Distractions

1. Weak powers of concentration; inability to remain focused -short periods-lengthen. Saint Augustine himself commended the practice of many short, fervent prayers, and warns against forcing attention in prayer. Know your temperament and adjust.¹

¹ Augustine *Ad Probam*: "The brethren in Egypt are said to make frequent prayers, but they are very short and uttered rapidly, so that the vigilantly erected attention that is necessary for someone who prays a lot

2. physical or mental fatigue (praying when tired is not helpful)
 - a. if a morning person, pray then—but don't stretch your tendencies too much
 - b. prefer saving prayer till end of day? Okay, but things happen, and you may find the day quickly passing by.
3. laziness
 - a. habits are developed by the repetition of acts.
 - b. If you are unwilling to develop a habit of prayer, do not complain if you do not feel consolation from God.
4. inhospitable circumstances for prayer; posture, external noises
 - a. you must be comfortable; environment is important.
 - b. Tough to pray well in a steamy Church—understand that!

If, in the recesses of your heart you hear the voice of the Lord calling you to make a change in your life, then ask for the grace to follow through. It takes an act of the will to move to accept the graces offered by God. The graces will never be lacking, even as God never forces graces upon people against their will.

In short, our Scripture invite us to welcome God's Word, to love God will all our heart and soul, not to hold back. Our sufficiency is from our Lord, not from ourselves. Listen, observe and above all—act!

should not slacken and languish because of more prolonged pauses. By doing this they show clearly enough that just as this attention should not be forced if one is unable to endure, so, too, it should not be broken off too quickly if one does endure." Quoted in Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologiae, II-II, q. 83, art. 14