

Feast of the Holy Family
Year A, 2025

Sir 3:2-6, 12-14 Col 3:12-21
Ps 128 Mt 2:13-15, 19-23

Obedience and loyalty

Last Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Advent, we reflected briefly on what the expression “*the obedience of faith*” (Rom 1:5) could mean, how faith opens us to listening for the voice of God, disposes our hearts and minds to receiving his word, and then moves us to act on it. We saw how St Joseph exemplified this obedience of faith when the angel appeared to him in a dream and told him to take Mary into his home as his wife and to accept as his own the child who was not his. Promptly, courageously, Joseph obeyed.

In today’s gospel, we witness Joseph again obedient, as he must uproot his family – Mary and Jesus in tender and vulnerable state – and flee into a foreign country to escape persecution and death. Just like that, under threat from an angry and vindictive tyrant, the Holy Family becomes refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers. Perhaps this experience is what would later lead Jesus to include welcoming strangers, along with feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and visiting those imprisoned, among the righteous deeds done for him when done for the least (Mt 25:35, 43). Blessed is the land and the people that welcomed the Holy Family in their time of need! On the other hand, Jesus himself calls “*accursed*” those who give no welcome to the stranger. The unwelcoming he sends “*off to eternal punishment*” (Mt 25:41, 46).

In pronouncing this, his judgment upon the nations, Jesus was showing himself obedient to the law given his Father through Moses. For those who know the scriptures, it should come as no surprise how repeatedly and insistently the books of Moses and the books of the prophets call for the welcome and just treatment of aliens, foreigners, sojourners, strangers, all of whom today we might call immigrants. Here are only a few representative examples:

Exodus 12:49: *“There will be one law for the native and for the alien residing among you.”* Leviticus 19:34: *“You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you”* (See also Lev 24:22, Num 15:15-16, 29).

Exodus 22:20: *“You shall not oppress or afflict a resident alien, for you were once aliens residing in the land of Egypt.”* (See also Ex 23:9; Lev 19:33; Dt 1:16; 24:14, 17; 27:19).

Deuteronomy 10:17ff: *“For the Lord, your God... loves the resident alien, giving them food and clothing. So you too should love the resident alien, for that is what you were in the land of Egypt.”* (See also Lev 19:34).

Then the prophets issue the same warnings, calling the people back to obedience, to fidelity and loyalty to the commandments of their God. Jeremiah 22:3: *“Do not wrong or oppress the resident alien, the orphan, or the widow.”* (See also Jer 7:6; Ez 22:7, 29; Zech 7:10).

Even the book of Psalms (146:9): “*The Lord protects the resident alien, comes to the aid of the orphan and the widow, but thwarts the way of the wicked.*”

As I will explain in a moment, obedience is no easy thing, which is why it is best learned from an early age and in the heart of a loving and supportive family. Joseph and Mary both exemplify the obedience of faith: when God speaks, they hear, and hearing, they act in accordance with the word of God. God’s word is law, and they are loyal, above all, to the word of God. Obedience and loyalty, these are two hallmarks of the Holy Family.

We see their obedience and loyalty in action in the gospel of Luke (2:21ff), where Mary and Joseph fulfill the law of Moses and have the child Jesus circumcised on the eighth day of his life and when later, on the fortieth day, they present him to the Lord in the temple, consecrating him by offering “*the sacrifice of ‘a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,’ in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord.*” From Mary and Joseph, Jesus would learn the same obedience and loyalty to God, subjecting himself to his parents in obedience, listening to them, and honoring them as God commanded in the fourth commandment. Luke records the finding in the temple, when Jesus, now twelve years old, was separated from Mary and Joseph for three days. Once reunited with his parents, Jesus returned with them to Nazareth “*and was obedient to them.*”

To be obedient means to listen to. To whom must we be obedient? To whom must we listen? To God above all. When God speaks, we listen, we obey. If his word seems too hard for us to understand, all the same, we submit ourselves to his authority, surrendering our own. This leads to loyalty. We trust his judgment above our own, and with reason: he is God. Those who stand in awe of God and walk in his ways are blessed indeed.

What comes to mind is the episode in the gospel of Luke (5:1-11) where Simon had been fishing all night and caught nothing. Exhausted and frustrated, he was washing his nets when Jesus stepped into this boat and began to teach the crowds. When a carpenter commanded a fisherman on how to fish, Simon expressed his misgivings, but then he complied: *"at your command I will lower the nets."* Simon's obedience, even when reluctant, even when he did not understand, led to an abundance that he could not have hoped for. Never mind his nets and his boat, his heart was made full. Something in his soul was healed. He left behind everything – his boat, his family, his ego – and followed Jesus. Obedience brought about loyalty.

Over and over in the gospels we see Simon Peter struggle to accept the word of his master, simply because he does not understand. But over and over we see Simon Peter finally yield to Jesus, surrendering his will, his thoughts, his ideas in order to conform himself to God. *"He must increase; I must decrease"* (Jn 3:30). Others

will walk away from Jesus, but Simon Peter knows: “*Master, to whom shall we turn? You have the words of everlasting life*” (Jn 6:68).

When obedience is easy, is it even obedience? Is it obedience to eat dessert or to eat vegetables? Is it obedience to play or to work? Is it loyalty “*if you love those who love you*,” “*if you greet your brothers only*”? Or is that the pagan, that is, the natural way? Isn’t this the supernatural way: “*But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ... be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (see Mt 5:43-48)?

Our fallen nature leads us to reject the stranger and to refuse welcome, while the Redeemer of all bids us show love, kindness, and mercy to outsiders, to bring them in so that they can belong to us as we belong to him. Real obedience is hard. It entails subduing in me that which is fallen and harsh. Real obedience means allowing God’s spirit to change my heart of stone to a heart of flesh (Ez 11:19, 36:26). Obedience will also bring about *metanoia*, conversion.

When I do what I want to do, and that just so happens to coincide with what God commands, I cannot claim any obedience or loyalty, for I cannot be sure whether I am following God’s will or my own. But I know I am obedient and loyal when it costs me something, when I have to surrender my own likes, preferences, and will, my own fears and misgivings, in order to follow God’s way when I know that I would not otherwise choose that way. When the way I am walking is easy and congenial to my prejudices

and preferences, that is a sign that I may be going astray: “*the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many.*” Few are those who find the “*narrow gate*” and the “*constricted road*” that lead to life (Mt 7:13-14).

Jesus, ever obedient to his Father, made it a point to teach his disciples about this trap, about how our own biases and preconceptions can lead us into temptation and result in disobedience and disloyalty. Jesus chastised the Pharisees and those who conveniently took their side, following their compromised teachings: “*You disregard God’s commandment but cling to human tradition... How well you have set aside the commandment of God in order to uphold your tradition!... You nullify the word of God in favor of your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many such things*” (Mk 7:8, 9, 13).

Human traditions, human considerations, human compromises, human weakness and greed and apathy all try to mitigate or even cancel out the clear commandments of God and lead us away from obedience and loyalty to the one whose words are everlasting life. Aware of this, Jesus went on the offensive in his teaching, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, when he repeatedly addressed the crowds by saying, “*You have heard it said... but I say to you...*” (Mt 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43), about killing and anger; about adultery and lust and divorce; about oaths and lying; about retaliation and vengeance; about loving your friends and hating your enemies. Jesus does not dismiss the law. He reinforces it,

points out that its perfection and fulfillment can be found only in love, a selfless and other-oriented love.

Jesus obliterates all our excuses for disobedience. We can no longer pretend to be loyal to him while doing the opposite, while hiding behind the pretexts of human and worldly ways of thinking and acting. We walk with him or we walk away from him. We cannot serve two masters; we *“will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other”* (Mt 6:24; Lk 16:13). To whomever we are devoted, to him we will be loyal and obedient. There can be no divided loyalties, no partial allegiances. It is God or nothing. And so we must take care about who and what we are listening to, for that will determine the quality of both our obedience and our loyalty.

At the end of the book of Joshua (24:14-16), Joshua exhorts the people to serve the Lord *“completely and sincerely,”* casting out any and every false god that they once clung to. He tells them to make a choice, to serve the Lord God or if this *“is displeasing”* to them, to choose to serve some other god – surely a false god, an empty idol. *“As for me and my household,”* he says, *“we will serve the Lord.”*

Just as the Holy Family served the Lord in obedience, so may all who call themselves disciples of the Lord Jesus follow his example and be obedient to all that God commands us,

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Holy Family of Nazareth, pray for us!