

Learning to Listen

Three very simple words: “Listen to Him.”

What does that look like for us? How do we listen to the Lord and follow where He leads? It's both simple and takes a little bit of training, but we are all able to do this.

Pope Leo led off the Lenten season with a letter, as the popes usually do at the beginning of Lent, to all the faithful. His focus this year was on listening. That got me thinking about what listening means and how it really relates to Lent. I think the Pope has something there that I had never really thought of: Lent is really about learning to listen.

Now, we hear from the Lord in various ways that are very obvious. The Lord speaks to us through Church teaching. The Lord speaks to us through Scripture. And the Lord speaks to us through conscience. Those three ways in which the Lord speaks to us are very important and have a privileged place.

But those three ways of speaking don't always speak to the real realities of our life, especially when we're trying to make a decision. If you're trying to figure out what you're supposed to give up for Lent, Church teaching doesn't say that. Scripture doesn't necessarily make it clear. But the Lord wants us to be able to listen to Him and to follow.

What I want to make really clear today is that all of us are wired to hear from God. Everyone. Even Abraham: he's a pagan. He's not even a Christian. He hears God and he follows. But we as Christians are given an additional gift that allows us to listen to Him. We call that the gift of counsel, one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. You were given it in Baptism and it was strengthened in you in Confirmation.

Counsel is the gift by which we learn to listen to the Lord. But like all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, it takes some cultivation to really become good at this, to really hear from the Lord.

Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice.” That's you. You're the sheep. So am I.

God has designed you and wired you to be able to hear from Him because He's made you for relationship. He's made you for relationship with Himself. And there is no good relationship without communication. But again, we have to work at this.

So what we're going to cover today are three principles and four modes, because there are four different ways we hear from the Lord, and only one of them is somewhat verbal or audible. The other three are not. We have to learn and attune ourselves to how the Lord actually speaks.

Three Principles for Hearing the Lord

Before we get to the four different modes, or ways this can happen for us, there are three important principles.

The first important principle of hearing from the Lord is that we have to have an attitude of heart that, for the most part, we are going to do what He asks us to do. Now, it seems really basic, but it's actually really important. It's the first principle, and it isn't always the case.

We have to have an attitude of heart and trust in God that, if He actually reveals to us the way He is asking us to go—say, on a particular decision—we are actually going to follow and do what He asks us to do. He does that, in a sense, to keep us out of an occasion of sin. If He revealed Himself to us, but we did not have a heart actually willing to follow, He would be putting us, in a sense, in an occasion of sin.

So He often won't speak or encourage us in terms of what we are to do if we don't first have an attitude that, if we consult the Lord and He reveals the answer, we're going to follow most of the time. It's the attitude of heart, more or less, of obedience. And part of the Transfiguration, by the way, reveals that obedience is what leads to transformation. Obedience is what leads to transformation for us.

The second principle seems really obvious, but may not occur to us necessarily. Often it's a good idea not to give advice unless your advice is solicited. It's often a good idea not to give advice unless someone asks for your advice. That's not true in every case, but as a general principle, it kind of holds.

Well, God does the same thing. God more or less does the same thing. God is not intrusive, and so He probably won't give us advice unless we ask. So the first principle is the attitude of heart of obedience. The second principle is that you have to ask Him what He thinks.

Does that seem really obvious? But how often do we actually do that? When was the last time you were planning a big vacation and actually asked the Lord if He wanted it for you? I'm just asking a question. The Lord actually might have something. The Lord does want us to take vacation, by the way. He rejoices when we rejoice. That's why we have a Sabbath. We're supposed to get breaks—probably far more breaks than we normally take. But did you ask Him if He actually wanted you to go to Paris this year or next year? I'm just asking.

So: the attitude of heart to respond in obedience, and secondly, you have to ask Him: "Lord, do You want me to do X or Y?"

The third principle of hearing the Lord's voice well—or hearing how the Lord communicates to us well, because again, of the four modes only one of them is vocal—is what St. Ignatius calls the means of discernment. We have to create the conditions for hearing the Lord's voice well, and those conditions are silence and Scripture.

This doesn't necessarily mean you're going to get the answer when you're reading Scripture or when you're in silence. I'll say that again: it does not necessarily mean that you'll get the answer to the question you pose to the Lord in silence or in Scripture. Rather, that is the means by which we are tuned to God's voice whenever He chooses to reveal Himself to us.

You have to read Scripture if you're going to hear the Lord's voice well, because that's the ordinary way He speaks to us. The Holy Spirit moves through Scripture whenever we open it and are open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit through those sacred, inspired words.

So again: it's the attitude of heart of obedience; it's actually asking Him what He thinks; and then it's cultivating the means of discernment, as St. Ignatius Loyola calls them, by taking time in silence and Scripture on a regular basis.

Four Modes of Listening

Not everyone will get answers from the Lord in the same way. He can communicate all four of these ways with us, and some people experience all four. But I think most people find that one of these four modes is the way they most often get an answer when they are consulting the Lord about something.

The first mode I want to call the feeler: the person who feels. This is probably closest to what St. Ignatius Loyola calls discernment of spirits. It's a way of being attentive to our emotions and being attentive to our heart.

When we're trying to make a decision about something in terms of what the Lord wants—considering two possibilities, or potentially three, though it's best when we phrase a question to the Lord as two possibilities—when we are prayerfully considering possibility A, the heart moves to a place of peace; whereas with the other option, the heart moves to a place of something else. When we're praying about these things, the heart eventually moves to a place of peace about one decision. That is the indication of the Holy Spirit that this is the right decision.

Why is that? Because peace is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Where the Holy Spirit is, there is freedom and there is peace. So when you're leaning into one of the two decisions, and your heart really becomes peaceful about it, it's a really good indication that the Lord has spoken to you. You may say, "But He didn't say anything." Yes, He did. He spoke peace to you. God says, "Let there be light," and there is light. When the Holy Spirit is present, He speaks peace, and there is peace. So that's mode one: the feeler.

The second mode in which people often hear the Lord respond to them I'm going to call the hearer. For some folks, they actually hear the Lord—not audibly. There are mystics who actually do hear the Lord audibly, but there are very few mystics out there. But there is a

vocal kind of resonance interiorly, or a word or phrase just continues to come up around a certain decision. A word or Scripture passage comes up, kind of verbally, and the words of the Scripture passage seem to indicate one or the other option.

This is the First Kings 19 Elijah moment, where he hears the Lord in the still small voice—not the earthquake, not the fire, and so on. People who tend to hear the Lord need to cultivate even more silence than the rest, to get in tune with the Lord's voice interiorly, or the word, phrase, or Scripture that comes up. The Lord communicates kind of verbally. That's the second mode.

The third mode I'm going to call the seer, meaning visual. For someone who is a seer, when they are prayerfully considering something, they usually get the answer not in prayer but out in the world: they see a sign. They see a metaphor, or somehow a parable comes to mind for them. It's a visual way in which the Lord more or less communicates His desire for them.

Visual people also sometimes dream. God can speak to us through dreams if we're prayerfully discerning something, though it still needs to be discerned. Dreams can be really mixed. But that person is a seer. Normally they see some sign when they're out in their daily business. They're prayerfully considering this and asking the Lord what He wants, and there is clearly an encounter, a sign—something happens in the day-to-day that pretty clearly indicates what it seems the Lord is saying.

By the way, all these things have to be trained, and we become more and more accurate in discernment the more we take risks with it.

The final mode I call the knower. This is probably the closest to what St. John Henry Newman calls the illative sense. For the knower, as they're prayerfully considering something, there really aren't emotions involved at all. Rather, after a period of time of praying about something, they have a strong inner impression, with really strong confidence, about what the right path is. It's a strong inner conviction that comes after prayerfulness—what St. John Henry Newman would probably call the illative sense. There's just a real certitude about what the right decision is after prayerfully considering it and consulting the Lord about it.

“My sheep hear my voice.” But we hear Him in different ways. Let us prayerfully trust that God is still speaking, and that because He loves us and we are His beloved, He is speaking to us.

Here's a recommended homework. If you have some sort of medium decision—not the big thing, and not the little thing like, “Do I go to Safeway or Albertsons?” Don't spend time

discerning that. We don't have to discern everything. But if you have kind of a medium decision coming up about something—and a big vacation is a medium decision, by the way—maybe consult the Lord and try this discernment process.

The Lord says, “Listen to Him.” And we listen to Him because the paths He leads us on are always going to be good pasture. When we hear His voice and follow Him as sheep who desire to hear His voice and follow, I promise you, dear friends, it leads to the greenest and best pastures.

So as we receive Him in the Eucharist today, let us ask Him for the grace to listen and for hearts that want to follow. Praise be Jesus Christ.