

36. “Listen to him” (Mt 17:5)

Although the Gospels offer us countless sayings of Christ, they record for us only three statements of the Father. We should hold them very precious! One of them is a counsel, the one and only counsel of the Father to his children. Should we not receive it with infinite, intensely filial deference, and obey it with the greatest zeal? This counsel, which contains the secret of all holiness, is expressed in three simple words: “Listen to him” (Mt 17:5). That is what the Father says in pointing out his beloved Son to us.

To engage in mental prayer is thus the great act of obedience to the Father. It is to sit like Mary of Bethany at the feet of Christ to listen to his words, or better still, to listen to him speaking to us. Indeed, we must be attentive to him, even more than to his words.

It follows that it is very commendable to engage in mental prayer based on a page of Scripture. We must not read this page like a professor of literature, but like a woman in love who listens to the heartbeat of her lover beyond the words written in the letters she receives from him.

It is a great art to know how to listen. Christ has told us so himself: “Take heed, therefore, how you hear” (Lk 8:18). If we are like a footpath, or rocky ground, or soil choked with briars and thorns (cf. Lk 8:5-8), his word cannot grow within us. We need to be like good soil where the seed that is sown finds all that it needs to sprout, develop and ripen.

Besides, listening is not solely the work of the intellect. Our whole being, soul and body, mind and heart, imagination, memory, and will, must be attentive to Christ’s words. We must welcome them and make room for them. Our whole being must allow itself to be surrounded, penetrated, and possessed by Christ’s words, and accept them totally, without reservation.

You understand why I use the word “listen” in preference to “meditate.” It has a more evangelistic tone, and above all it describes not a solitary activity but an encounter, an exchange, a heart-to-heart talk. And this is essentially what mental prayer is.

The truth is, that without grace nobody would be able to listen to Christ, because we are all born deaf, children of a race afflicted with deafness. But at the time of our baptism, Christ pronounced the word which—since the healing of the deaf-mute of the Decapolis—has opened the ears of millions of disciples: “*Ephphatha!*” (“*Be opened!*”) (Mk 7:34).

When we grant Christ’s word access through mental prayer, it converts us, makes us “*pass from life to death*” (cf. Jn 5:24), and brings us back to life. It becomes in us, for us, a gushing spring of eternal life.

But it is not enough to listen to the word. Christ tells that “*blest are they who hear the word of God and keep it*” (Lk 11:28). Blest are they who delight in it and are nourished by it, who carry it about with them the way Mary carried the child she had conceived—he who is the subsistent Word. Through his Mother, Jesus sanctified those whom she encountered, causing John the Baptist to leap for joy in Elizabeth’s womb. He wants to do the same through us.

And that is still not saying enough. Once heard and kept, this word “*must be carried out in practice*” (cf. Jn 1:25). Understand this to mean that we must be attentive to Christ’s dynamic presence within us throughout the day. We must be eager to follow his suggestions and inspirations. It is the dynamism of the word that will make us multiply

good works, and which will inspire us to toil, suffer, and die for the coming of the Father's Kingdom. If we are faithful, our joy will be great because Jesus has said, *"My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act upon it"* (Lk 8:21).