

Reflection for Pentecost 5 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

From a young age, one of the things most parents seek to teach their children is obedience. Obedience is a vital ingredient, not only in their social upbringing, in becoming a useful and acceptable member of society, but also in their general welfare and safety, especially during those early years of life. "Don't run or you'll fall" "Stop: don't go near the road" "Clean your teeth" "It's hot: don't touch" the list is almost endless.

At first, parents are looking for the child simply to obey however reluctantly: a bit like a soldier when the order comes to march forward; trained to do so without question. Later, as the child grows and develops, they begin to understand and appreciate more clearly the reasoning that lies behind these commands, and as they do so the orders are required less frequently as they become part of normal life and behaviour.

Inside each of us there is the desire to do things our way; to put ourselves first. Put some folk behind the wheel of a car and this comes out, with the desire to drive dangerously fast. It is only the blue light in the mirror or the speed camera that remind them of the need to obey the rules, not only for their own good but also for the wellbeing of others - something emphasised in speed awareness courses.

St Paul in chapter 7 of his letter to the Romans, is struggling with the same sort of idea. Let me remind you of one verse (15). *"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."*

What we have here is a clear split in the "I"; between my will and my doing. *"I don't do what I want, but I do what I hate."*

What the apostle is acknowledging is the constant struggle that goes on inside each one of us; a struggle which, for the apostle has been magnified not diminished by him becoming a Christian - the struggle between the way of Christ and the way of sin.

At the point of becoming a Christian, we are put right with God, through his love and his grace; but that does not remove us from the world in which we live, with all its pressures and so-called pleasures. We are still part of fallen humanity. We still sin and put ourselves first so often.

This is exactly what the apostle is noting in that verse – he does things that he does not understand, he does things that he does not want to do because of the nature that is within him.

What is also coming through is that because Paul knows the love of God and the grace of God to forgive and that makes him more, not less, aware of his failings. The struggle to follow Christ has been magnified, not diminished.

As we look at ourselves, like the Apostle, we should come to the same conclusion: that we are involved in a constant struggle, and one that leaves us at times having to confess our failings. The question is how do we move forward from here, how do we fight the battle?

Maybe the first step in this is to go back to the image of young child learning obedience. Bit by bit, time and again that child needs to be reminded – “don’t do that” gradually it sinks in and becomes a reality in their young lives.

In a spiritual sense, it is similar, we need to constantly be reminded of the image of Christ - images such as Jesus kneeling and washing his disciples' feet. We need to learn to be obedient so that our minds will want to serve God. Then gradually this will become visible and our human nature will move in a Christ-like direction.

One aspect of this is making time for prayer and the study of scripture. It means learning for ourselves the discipline that we try to teach our children, so that the balance shifts from – “I do what I hate” to “I do what I want, too.” In other words, it becomes more natural to follow Christ, and our values are governed by God’s law, not our sinful nature.

There is nothing wrong with that being merely a habit to start with, as with the youngster, but it must not stop there: we need a growing desire to understand and to explore. We need to move from blind obedience to acceptance at a much deeper level. Spiritually, we must grow up and discover the real freedom that comes with following God.

The final thing to note is the way St Paul finishes that section *“Thanks be to God, who does this through our Lord Jesus Christ!” (TEV)*

The Apostle acknowledges that there is a battle in all of us, we have to struggle with it ourselves. But, as with all things in the Christian life, it is only with the power of Holy Spirit that God at work; that we can become truly Christ-like. That means allowing God to take control and welcoming him in through his spirit. It also means that we must hold each other before God in prayer, asking God to mould us into his people.

We are all involved in a daily struggle to become Christ-like. May we be able to say with St Paul, *“Thanks be to God, who does this through our Lord Jesus Christ!”* as we grow in our faith and actions.