**Chapter 5: Obedience**

January 22, May 23, September 22

*The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience, which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all. Because of the holy service they have professed, or because of dread of hell and for the glory of everlasting life, they carry out the superior’s order as promptly as if the command came from God himself. The Lord says of people like this: “No sooner did he hear than they obeyed me” (Ps. 17[18]:45); and again, he tells teachers: “Whoever listens to you, listens to me” (Luke 10:16). Such people as these immediately put aside their own concerns, abandon their own will, and lay down whatever they have in hand, leaving it unfinished. With the ready step of obedience, they follow the voice of authority in their actions. Almost at the same moment, then, as the master gives the instruction the disciple quickly puts it into practice in the fear of God; and both actions together are swiftly completed as one.*

*It is love that impels them to pursue everlasting life; therefore, they are eager to take the narrow road of which the Lord says: “Narrow is the road that leads to life” (Matt. 7:14). They no longer live by their own judgement, giving in to their whims and appetites; rather they walk according to another’s decisions and directions, choosing to live in monasteries and have an abbot over them. Monks of this resolve unquestionably conform to the saying of the Lord: “I have come not to do my own will, but the will of the him who sent me” (John 6:38).*

Community and meditation are all about learning to participate, ever more deeply, in a life dynamic of dying and rising that sees us moving, ever more surely and steadily, from fear to love. Our participation in this dynamic must be practical and must happen in the ordinary of our lives. If the practical and the ordinary are absent, then all that is left is platitudes. Benedict knew this.

Practicing the inner action of attention on the mantra is dying to fear and rising to love. Being attentive and responsive to the daily needs of community is also dying to fear and rising to love. Being responsive to the suggestions and directions of others who are wiser and more experienced in this practice of loving attention and responsibility is also dying to fear and rising to love.

This inner and outer journey from fear to love is *the* challenge of our lives. With practice, we come to see and accept what is best set aside and what is best focused on and honed. This seeing and accepting, along with the actions that flow from this, *is* obedience. On this journey, this pilgrimage, we grow in this obedience that is a response-ability maturing in kindness, compassion, other-centredness – that is, in the God-life that is love. As this happens, life here and now becomes everlasting.

On this journey into love we are easily waylaid. The road is indeed narrow. It happens time and time again, and that’s ok. Being waylaid is part of the journey. Being waylaid as a way of life, however, is egocentricity. In so many ways this egocentricity is obedience to fear. It is as if there is, in our humanity, an essential dynamic of obedience that must be played out; with it we can grow in obedience to love, or to fear. In reality, we do both. However, dying to fear and rising to love means that a meditating community will be waylaid less often and consistently have obedience being realigned into the heart of love.

Obedience to fear tends to be reactive and isolating, while obedience to love is more responsive and spontaneous. Obedience to love naturally builds community. If at a community meeting, I am asked to look after the garden for the week, maybe there is an openness to this that naturally arises from my commitment to the community. Perhaps, though, I might experience a reaction against this request. If so, what might I be fearful of? Perhaps a loss of time and energy for the projects that I want to do instead; maybe people are about to find out how bad I am at gardening and this concerns me, I might be afraid to ask for help. These dynamics can also be at play when a father asks his teenage son to mow the lawn, or a daughter is asked to tidy her room, or our manager asks for more from us at work.

All communities have a common routine that invites obedience. This routine is a part of the bigger picture that we commit to. This commitment is about growing in other-centredness, to a way of being in life that is bigger than just me meeting my own needs by myself. This practice feels like risk. Maturing in love asks us to let go and participate in the bigger picture more and more. Such things as the arrival of guests, the pattern of prayer and meditation, regular meals together, daily chores, common social activities, things happening that require immediate attention – all this and more is part of the bigger picture.

To cherish Christ is to embrace the realigning of our obedience into the heart of love. For Christians, Christ is this heart of love in our own heart. This realigning is to take on a discipline of loving; it is what it is to be a disciple of Christ. Christian leadership guides us into this Christ. And in this Christ we discover ourselves as loving. Through community and meditation attention is grounded more and more into a loving heart, into this Christ and self. In time, and with grace, loving from the heart becomes natural and normal. There is joy and release when we obey the drawing of love in the heart with whatever needs to be done.

My dear friends, let us love one another, since love is from God and everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. Whoever fails to love does not know God, because God is love. This is the revelation of God's love for us, that God sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him. (1 John 4:4-8, RNJB)