

Obedience

A Word That Needs Rescuing

Authority is often abused. In the last century it was, on a vast and disastrous scale. People accordingly mistrust authority, and sometimes despise obedience. In some ways, we should like mistrust to increase. Maybe we learned some lessons from Hitler, and some more from Stalin: but there is still Gaddafi, and there is still Saddam Hussein. Humanity has to repeat its lessons if it won't learn them.

The Church has sometimes been as bad as many secular dominions. People accordingly mistrust the Church. Many treasure the notion that they have outgrown most forms of authority, and consider human freedom, exercised by a liberated self, as the ultimate value. This quiet anarchism is not usually thought-out, but is still a powerful instinct. It is as if the supreme value is *always being free to choose*. Now I am uneasy: because *I didn't choose myself*. If freedom is the highest value, why can't I choose who to be? It seems this ultimate freedom is subject to extraordinary limits.

If, instead, the universe is actually a *creation*, in other words a cosmos which exists at the behest of a Creator, there is a higher value than my free choice: we are, finally, under the authority of God. Whatever happens, we will never escape from, or grow out of, that relationship. Nor should we try to. Our ultimate destiny *includes* an obedience which is part of the truth about existing. This isn't bad news. Because God is trustworthy, he *deserves* our obedience. Because he is the author of life, he is *worth* obeying!

Lesser forms of obedience are good for us at various times. We obey parents when we're children, because we are weak and they are strong. We obey teachers because they are wise and we are simple. We obey experts because they can solve problems we could not even diagnose. About these obediences there is little that is necessary or eternal. Still, in our relationships with each other we embody our relationship with God. Those whose authority we accept must try to treat us as respectfully and lovingly as God, who designed us, chose us, and gives us our place in his plan for eternity. We are not here to be abused or dominated. Human authority must be obedient to that.

No-one should represent God to us more carefully than the people we love. For this to happen, lovers must surrender everything in them which is disobedient to God's nature. Greed, hatred, lust, hunger for power can all be dressed up as love, and people can be deceived (even those who suffer from the vice may be unaware that it is not love: paedophiles, for instance, are often chillingly convinced that their attentions are beneficial to children). There is in true love a huge helping of obedience: first to God, who, unlike us, is pure love; but also to the beloved, whose needs and desires and even weaknesses must shape the way we love them.

I would point to the loving obedience of a parent to a child who wakes and wails at three am. I would ask how it comes to be decided which parent actually gets up to do the comforting (the one who is less exhausted: the one who has more freedom to rest the next day). The act of getting awake and schlepping the body into vertical is still sacrificial, but it is lightened by the obedience that springs from love. If it is well done, the world changes. The baby realises that the world is kind, and will come if she calls it. The waking parent draws closer to the baby, and experiences the strength and responsibility that flows from this marvellous relationship. The resting

spouse gratefully shares the burdens, and accepts the gift of sleep in the same spirit. This accurate generosity is made possible by obedience. Of course, disobedience could break out instead. There could be sheer resentment of the blue-pencilled child, who has been sent to drive us into an early grave; there could be an acrimonious dispute about who needs more sleep, followed by a hostile forensic exercise to determine who is the more tired; and at last the chosen method of child-care could take the form of frog-marching around the upper storey singing *On The Road To Mandalay* at 100 decibels.

The beauty of a good marriage draws much from obedience. If I might say so without indelicacy, good sex is about obedience: that precise harmony which takes care to learn the language of the other's body, and takes care to do all and only what is loving and appreciative: the whole relationship is a journey into depths of gratitude for the other person, displayed in a tender welcoming of difference, perfectly symbolised and incarnated in sexual love, the ultimate celebration of difference.

Supermarket of Values vs. Community of Faith

In the last few decades we have seen a sinking of respect for authority of any kind, even to the point where we prefer a pitiful impoverishment of wisdom to any surrender of individual autonomy. Our heroes have been lonely individualists, our anti-heroes craven conformists. We have insisted on the value of every human being making his own mistakes, choosing his own values, in some ways re-inventing the wheel. The cruel effects of this attitude have been seen in the crises threatening family life, marriage, parenting, and the peaceful conduct of communities, schools, townships, human society itself. Relationships have weakened and distorted, become less reliable, because making and keeping promises relies on authority and obedience. Our relationship with values has become a supermarket one: buy in to what seems good today, visit again tomorrow. There is a straight contradiction here to the kind of consistent faith expressed in community, sharing one life in the presence of one God.

Can we rescue the graceful and relational virtue of obedience from the sin-bin?