

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

I noticed a cell phone on the table about two minutes after my friend drove away. We had just enjoyed a pleasant conversation catching up with each other, said our goodbyes, and then he was off. I immediately asked the ridiculous question, “How do I call someone to tell him he left his phone behind? Do I get in my car and follow him home? Or do I stay in case he drives back?” The obvious answer took me a while to figure out. He would discover his phone was missing after he got home, where he’d have access to a computer, so I emailed him. That worked. He drove back, and I placed the phone in his hands.

We use various methods to communicate with one another. If one does not work or cannot work, we try some other way. In today’s gospel Jesus gives advice along these lines. When you need to correct someone, you may find that one method of communication isn’t working, so you try another one, and yet another one. Sometimes, no matter how you try, you can’t get through. What seems obvious to you is invisible to someone else.

Whereas today’s gospel deals with communication among human beings, our responsorial, Psalm 95, turns its light on the relationship between human beings and God. This psalm appears frequently as a responsorial at Mass, and in the Liturgy of the Hours it is one of the recommendations for the first prayer to say at the start of every day. It includes the word “today” and gives this straightforward advice as you wake up: “If today you hear [the Lord’s] voice, harden not your hearts.”

Psalm 95 recounts how Moses and the ungrateful Israelites made their Exodus from Egypt. Even after surviving ten plagues and crossing the Red Sea without boats, the people still had doubts about where they were heading and whether Moses was the right leader for them. The Lord must have been rolling his eyes. He had used various methods to communicate with them—in his word and in his deeds. He had provided manna and quail for food and water from the rock for drink. He was protecting them on their journey, but the people could not see it. In the psalm, God appeals to a later generation, people like us, and begs, “Harden not your hearts... as on that day... when your forebears put me to the test; when they tried me, though they saw my work.”

Any of us can probably look back through our lives and find times when we doubted if God really knew what he was doing. We have endured hardship, we’ve seen the suffering of others, our own perfectly good plans have not yielded the results we wanted. But, looking back later, we often see it wasn’t as bad as it seemed at the time. Knowing that past gives us strength when we cannot see the way forward in the present. We have seen the previous works of God; we should be able to trust in a better future. Although Psalm 95 phrases this as, “harden not your hearts,” in today’s lingo it probably means, “harden not your heads.”

When we are struggling to get through to someone else, and they’re just not listening, it is frustrating. Psalm 95 reveals God often feels the same way about us. God may not communicate with methods like a cellphone or email, but he speaks to us through his word and his deeds. If we take the time to sit and listen, we may hear his voice today.