

OUR OBSERVANCE OF LENT: "V. Discerning The Will Of God"

TEXT: "I appeal to you therefore.....by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

(Romans 12: 1, 2)

INTRODUCTION

To those of us who are regular churchgoers the words of the Apostle are familiar. We've heard them read in church many times. In a day when the thought of God, to say nothing of the will of God for the world and for individuals, is dying out of the modern mind, what do they mean to us? What weight have they for us? Do we take them seriously and in our Monday to Friday life and work act on them? Have we given our bodies to God as a living sacrifice? Are our lives consecrated and acceptable to Him? Do we conform to the world or have our minds been so renewed that our whole nature has been transformed? Do we seek day by day to discern the will of God for ourselves - the good, acceptable and perfect will of God? These are stringent questions. Lent, the season of the Church Year set apart for rigorous self-discipline and thorough self-examination, is the time to ask them.

TO DO THE WILL OF GOD

In what it says about our relation to the will of God the Bible is rigorous. We may not like what it says. If we claim the right to do what we please, see and choose our way, order and direct the course of our lives, we may resist and reject its absolute demands. The Bible says that the one end, not just the chief end, of our existence is to do the will of God. We are to seek to act as God would act. We are to put His will before our own. From first to last, we are to fix the emphasis on God and not on ourselves, our personal interests and ambitions. Our supreme duty is to obey God, and all other duties have reality and worth only as they are subordinated to this one. Our ultimate responsibility is to God and this is what is to determine our thought and action. It is the standard to which every thing is to conform. We are to seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness and are to regard the physical necessities of life as of secondary importance. Even loyalty to family is to be subordinated to devotion to God's will. Said Jesus:

"Whosoever shall do the will of my father - he is my brother and my sister and my mother!"

The motive at the heart of our moral life is to be the desire to serve God to whom we owe a limitless obedience.

WE SEE IT IN JESUS AND OTHERS

This is what we see in Jesus. He summed up His own mission and his own end in life in a sentence: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work". We see this singleness of purpose in many other great and dedicated souls. They have possessed, what in our day is noticeably lacking, a strong sense of direction; they have not vacillated from interest to interest, from goal to goal, because they have known what the main issue in life is. Abraham Lincoln regarded himself as (and the words are his own) - "a humble instrument in the hands of God to work out his purpose". And Albert Schweitzer gathered up the philosophy of his life in four sentences:

"To know the will of God is the greatest knowledge. To suffer the will of God is the greatest heroism. To do the will of God

is the greatest achievement. To have the approval of God on your work is the greatest happiness."

For Lincoln, for Schweitzer and for many other great souls and supremely for Jesus, doing the will of God was a personal and positive undertaking. And this is what the third petition of the Lord's Prayer clearly indicates it should be - "Thy will be done on earth". But that is not how it has always been understood. Many people think of the will of God as something to be dreaded. They link it in their minds with loss, pain, disappointment, disease and death. They offer the prayer, "Thy will be done" as a pious cry of resignation, a resignation that comes close to fatalism, so that what was meant to be a battle cry is turned into a wailing litany. People praying this prayer have resigned themselves to evils which they should have opposed, have acquiesced in social conditions which they should have taken steps to change.

We should think of God's will in positive ways. All the things that make for a better world are the will of God - health, not disease, decent housing and not slums, peace and not war - for His will is good, acceptable, perfect. "Thy will be done" should not be a moan of resignation. It should be made a hymn and sung to joyful music, as indeed it has been -

"Not in dumb resignation
We lift our hands on high;
Not like the nerveless fatalist
Content to do and die;
Our faith springs like the eagle
That soars to meet the sun,
And cries exulting unto thee,
'O Lord, thy will be done!'"

Evelyn Underhill stated the case well:

"To say day by day, 'Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' - if these tremendous words really stand for a conviction and desire - does not mean, 'I hope that some day the kingdom of God will be established and peace and goodwill prevail, but at present I don't see how it is to be managed or what I can do about it.' On the contrary, it means or should mean, 'Here am I! Send me! - active, costly collaboration with the God in whom we believe.'"

Before leaving this point, and to guard against misunderstanding, I would add this. I do not mean to suggest that "Thy will be done" is not a prayer to be offered when calamity comes. Certainly it is to be offered then. This was the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane, "Nevertheless not my will, but thine be done". But think of what He rose from his knees to accomplish. Calamity is no respecter of persons. Sooner or later it may come our way. The thing to do then is what Jesus did - not resign ourselves to it or submit to it in helpless, passive fashion, but stand up to it, find out what good can come of it, face it in the sense of making a creative use of it. The thing to do is to pray, "Thy will be done" and done by me!

DISCERNING THE WILL OF GOD

I would turn now to the practical question: how can we find out what the will of God is for us - in the choice, let us say, of our life's work, or at any fork on the road of life when we are uncertain in which direction to turn?

Here what ought to give us pause and deliver us from dogmatism is that some terrible mistakes have been made by people who thought they knew and were doing the will

of God. John Newton was the author of the hymn "Glorious things of Thee are Spoken". A slave trader before he became a clergyman, on one of his voyages, with Negroes in chains below the deck, seized in Africa and on their way to America to be sold, he wrote: "I never held sweeter communion with God than I did on this voyage". The point is: terrible things have been done by men who were sure that they were doing God's will. Many of them would have claimed that they were being guided by their conscience, and conscience is one of the ways by which God guides us. But conscience may be dull and insensitive. It needs to be educated, to be illumined by the mind and spirit of Christ. Few things are more deeply rooted in human nature than the tendency to claim divine sanction for private inclinations. What is taken for the will of God may be no more than the tricking out in respectable colors of our own wishes and desires. It is often difficult for us to be clear and certain as to what the will of God for us in a given situation actually is.

A number of years ago when I came to a hard and difficult decision in my own life I prayed for guidance and turned to the Bible for counsel and direction. They did not come readily or immediately. I wanted the guidance to be distinct, specific, a pointer making the direction in which I should move unmistakable, a voice ringing in my ears and saying, "This is the way. Walk in it". Nothing of that sort happened. There was no green light flashing in the sky for me. No red light either.

Out of my experience and in retrospect I can offer this to anybody at a fork of life's road and seeking Divine Guidance. It is in keeping, I believe, with what the Bible and the Church teach. First, use your common sense, your sanctified common sense. You got it for that purpose. As the author of Green Pastures puts it: "I guess de Lawd means us to figure out a few things for ourselves". Divine inspiration is given us to enlighten rather than supercede our powers of rational and moral judgment. If we have to make a big decision ours is the responsibility for getting to know the facts of the case and thinking things through. Impulses and hunches should not be accepted blindly as direct voices of God. They ought to be examined by our conscience and our reason. Any decision we reach based on intelligence is a decision we have been helped to arrive at by God. Why did we get out intelligence except for use? At the same time we should beware of having too great confidence in our own judgment. Those who do not believe it possible that they may be mistaken are the most likely to mistake their own will for the will of God!

Second, we should listen to the advice of our best and wisest friends. We should check their judgment with our own. They can see our situation with a detached and more objective eye than our own. When at the cross-roads and uncertain in which direction to go, turn to a trusted friend - older, wiser. Weigh the facts with that friend, assess the pros and cons, consider the alternatives. Don't let him make up your mind for you. Make your own decision, but do it after you have talked to some one else. Is it not possible that God may be guiding you to the knowledge of His will through a friend. I think it is entirely possible.

Third, and most important of all....to know God's will for us we should rely on the Inner Light - the Light that enlightens every man who comes into the world. To be aware of it and sensitive to it, we must learn to be quiet, to wait on God, to find our way about in the Bible, to open our minds to the Divine Mind. In the Book of Discipline, the Friends say:

"Our power to perceive the light of God is, of all our powers, the one which we most need to cultivate and develop. As exercise strengthens the body and education enlarges the mind, so the spiritual faculty within us grows as we use it in seeing and doing God's will."

The spiritual faculty - that is what we should seek to nurture. It is when we are absorbed in the here and now that we become insensitive to the will of God and skeptical about Unseen Leadership. On the other hand, when prayer is a daily habit and we are spiritually self-disciplined, we pass from one task to another quietly and without haste, sustained by the sense of God's presence and conscious of His hand on our life.

One last thing to consider. Isn't it true that doing the will of God is too often associated only with our religious activities. It should be, I feel, associated with our daily work. To do that cheerfully and as well as we can is doing the will of God. This is what gives high meaning to our several occupations and rids us of any idea that God is better served by "spiritual exercises" than by honest manual and mental work. A salesman putting his best effort into his task and performing it as a service to men is doing the will of God as truly as any rabbi, priest or minister. The same is true of all who do their daily work competently, responsibly and honorably.

In order to discern and do the will of God, try saying to yourself what ~~Do you want to know how you can discern and do the will of God? Say what~~ George Herbert did, the man who wrote the lines of our second hymn:

"Teach me, my God and King;
In all things Thee to see;
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for Thee."

LET US PRAY

O God, as we try sincerely to follow the directions that come from thee so that our lives may be lived creatively and usefully, help us to keep our eyes fixed upon thee as the great Conductor of life, and to follow any directions that may come from thee. But when there are no directions, help us to read the music as it is written, and to hear it as it was played by Jesus of Nazareth whose mission was to do thy will and to accomplish thy work. In his spirit, we pray. Amen

All ~~my~~ of thee partake;
Nothing so small can be
But draws, when acted for thy sake,
Greatness and worth from Thee.

If done to obey Thy laws,
E'en servile labors shine;
Hallowed is toil, if this the cause
The meanest work, divine

Thee, then my God and King,
In all things may I see;
And what I do, in anything,
May it be done for Thee!