

# THE WILL OF MY FATHER

By ROBERT MURRAY

**W**Henever we ask ourselves why God became man, we ask about a purpose, the purpose intended by God the Father which Christ fulfilled both by coming on earth and by his whole life and death. The Father's will is the beginning and end of the incarnation and redemption, as the earliest christian theological reflection clearly saw. Thus the author of Hebrews finds in Psalm 40 the words to express Jesus' sense of mission:

When he came into the world, he said:  
Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired,  
but a body hast thou prepared for me . . .  
Then I said, Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God,  
as it is written of me in the roll of the book.<sup>1</sup>

For the author of Hebrews, Jesus started from obedience yet also 'learned obedience through what he suffered';<sup>2</sup> as he is both the 'pioneer and perfecter of our faith',<sup>3</sup> so he advanced from his first act of obedience to the supreme achievement of it, the cross, 'and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him'.<sup>4</sup>

This is parallel to the movement in Philippians<sup>5</sup> where the incarnation is seen as an act of humility and, as in Hebrews, Christ's work is expressed as a growth in obedience up to the term set before him: 'he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross'.<sup>6</sup> The redemption which Christ came to effect was won for us by his obedience. 'For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous'.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the earliest essays in Christian theology saw both the incarnation and the redemption by the cross in terms of Christ's obedience to the Father's will. St John goes further and portrays Jesus

<sup>1</sup> Heb 10, 5-7. The hebrew text of the psalm seems to stress obedience even more, with 'but thou hast given me an open ear' (lit. has dug ears for me).

<sup>2</sup> Heb 5, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Heb 12, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Heb. 5, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Phil 2, 5-11.

<sup>6</sup> Phil 2, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Rom 5, 19.

as preoccupied with the Father's will at every moment, so that we see this utter devotion as Jesus' very food and even as the inner mainspring of his being.

*Jesus knows what is the Father's will.*

Jesus comes before us as one who knows where he has come from, where he is going, what he is doing and why. In John's gospel this is explicit; Jesus knew 'that he had come from God and was going to God';<sup>1</sup> 'I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me; and this is the will of him who sent me . . .'<sup>2</sup> But this sense of mission in obedience to the Father is already implicit even in such simple sayings as: 'Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out'.<sup>3</sup> The same knowledge of God's will, and determination to obey it, is contained in the simple 'must' of the passion predictions; 'he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things . . .'<sup>4</sup> The 'must' comes from God's will, as Peter had to be taught with uncompromising bluntness a moment later: 'Your ideas are not God's but merely human'.<sup>5</sup> The synoptics record three predictions, all implicitly witnessing to Christ's acceptance of the Father's will; and here already, as in the theology of Romans, Philippians and Hebrews, the focus is on the cross. The same is probably true of Matthew's account of the baptism, where Jesus overrides John's sense of indignity at his ranging himself with sinners; 'let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness'.<sup>6</sup> The last word may well mean here, as it so often does in deutero-Isaiah, God's salvific plan; the baptism is Jesus' first step towards his mediatorial sacrifice, and John's 'Lamb of God' only makes this explicit. In the passion narratives the 'must' comes again, but now God's will is enshrined especially in the prophecies: 'But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?'<sup>7</sup> 'This scripture must be fulfilled in me. And he was reckoned with transgressors';<sup>8</sup> and again in the retrospective review on the walk to Emmaus: 'Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and so enter into his glory?'<sup>9</sup>

Jesus knows the Father's will as he knows his own; he can declare it without any need for the prophetic 'Thus saith the Lord'. 'It is not

<sup>1</sup> Jn 13, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Mk 8, 31 and parallel texts.

<sup>7</sup> Mt 26, 54.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 6, 38-39.

<sup>5</sup> Mk 8, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Lk 22, 37.

<sup>3</sup> Mk 1, 38.

<sup>6</sup> Mt 3, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Lk 24, 26.



not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven'.<sup>1</sup> The same correlation between God's 'good pleasure' and 'little ones' comes again in St Paul<sup>2</sup> who clearly relates it to Christ's sonship and our adoption as sons of God.<sup>3</sup>

The Father's good pleasure is shown in a special way to the disciples. 'Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom'.<sup>4</sup> What the Father wills for Jesus, he shares with them: 'as my Father has appointed a kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you',<sup>5</sup> but also, using the symbolic figure for suffering willed by God which dominates the agony story: 'the cup that I drink you will drink'.<sup>6</sup> Once again it is John who expresses this sharing most fully: 'all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you'.<sup>7</sup> 'All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he (the Holy Spirit) will take what is mine and declare it to you'.<sup>8</sup> 'The Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from the Father'.<sup>9</sup> Jesus' self-consecration, though it is 'for the life of the world', is in a special sense for the disciples, not only for their redemption but also in order that in their degree they may share in his mission: 'and for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth'.<sup>10</sup>

According to Matthew, Jesus saw himself as 'sent' especially 'to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. While there are important hints of God's universal salvific will in the synoptics, it is John who shows it in Jesus' own consciousness, once again by that pregnant 'must': 'I have other sheep also, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice'.<sup>11</sup>

So far, then, we have reviewed the gospel records as they reflect the disciples' impressions of One who spoke of the heavenly Father as never before, revealing implicitly or explicitly an intimate knowledge of the Father's will for himself, for the disciples and for the world. We have dwelt on Christ's knowledge though it is not distinct from his obedient will; now let us pass to consider this and his teaching of obedience.

*Jesus reveals perfect obedience to the Father's will.*

The religion of Jesus, like that of the great prophets before him, delivers revelation to man, and yet is not a matter of salvation by *gnosis*, by knowledge of mysteries. Just as he stressed doing rather

<sup>1</sup> Mt 16, 17.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 1, 21ff.

<sup>3</sup> Eph 1, 5-10.

<sup>4</sup> Lk 12, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Lk 22, 29.

<sup>6</sup> Mk 10, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Jn 15, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Jn 16, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Jn 16, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Jn 17, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Jn 10, 16.

than hearing, so the vocation of the apostles is 'to bring about obedience to the faith';<sup>1</sup> the encounter with Christ may blind a man and reduce his knowledge to darkness till through obedience he has new eyes opened for him. 'What I am doing you do not know now, but afterwards you will understand'.<sup>2</sup> 'If any man's will is to do his (the Father's) will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God'.<sup>3</sup> Jesus reveals the Father's will, but not merely as something that can be stated. He reveals it above all by doing it and teaching men what they must do in order to meet its demands; it is by doing the Father's will that they will come to understand it.

As Hebrews takes a motto for the incarnation from the psalms, so Luke symbolizes the direction of Jesus' will, already on the threshold of manhood, by the story of his remaining in the Temple. 'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' (or 'about my Father's business').<sup>4</sup> The symbolic gesture once made, however, Jesus returns to many more years of hidden, unsensational obedience, which perhaps only a meditative faith will quite rightly observe to be also offered to the Father, as author of the commandments.

The baptism accounts, as we have seen, reveal Jesus' self-consecration as mediator between God and sinful men, taking his place among the penitents of Israel and attested by the divine voice as accepted and beloved. Matthew's account in particular stresses Jesus' submission to God's 'righteousness' or salvific plan. But the fullest demonstration of Jesus' total devotion to the Father's will is the story of the temptations; this, prefixed to the public life, balances the account of the agony in the garden at its end, as is positively hinted at by Luke's saying that the devil left him 'till an opportune time'.<sup>5</sup> The author of Hebrews seems to have both scenes in mind where he speaks of Christ as 'tempted as we are, yet without sinning'<sup>6</sup> and as crying to God 'who was able to save him from death'.<sup>7</sup> In the temptation narrative of Matthew and Luke, Jesus never lets the devil find a crack in his defences, so fast does he cleave to God's will; not now by revealing his divine sonship, which for the devil is only a hypothesis ('if thou art the Son of God'), but by holding fast to God's written word and refusing to enter into discussion.

We have already considered many sayings in the synoptic gospels which implicitly embody Jesus' total devotion to the Father's will. In the accounts of the public life, however, the synoptics have no

<sup>1</sup> Rom 1, 5; 16, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Lk 4, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 13, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Heb 4, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 7, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Heb 5, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Lk 2, 49.

explicit expressions such as abound in St John; it is only in his teaching that Jesus shows the supreme and exclusive claim which the Father's will must have on us as it has on himself. St John, on the other hand, cannot emphasize enough that Jesus is always doing the Father's will throughout his life: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work'.<sup>1</sup> 'My judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me'.<sup>2</sup> 'I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me'.<sup>3</sup> 'I do nothing on my own authority, but speak thus as the Father taught me . . . for I always do what is pleasing to him'.<sup>4</sup> 'I know him and I keep his word'.<sup>5</sup> From chapter 10, these sayings point increasingly towards the passion. 'For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father'.<sup>6</sup> Clearest of all, in the discourse before the passion John shows Jesus going to his death as a sacrifice of love, freely undertaken and offered. 'I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go hence'.<sup>7</sup>

After this majestic characterization of Jesus' devotion, John does without an account of the agony; his equivalent, which looks as if it is connected with the synoptic source, comes in the discourse to the greeks before the passion: 'Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say . . . Father, save me from this hour? No, for this purpose have I come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name'.<sup>8</sup> The synoptists, in contrast with John, concentrate their picture of Jesus' sacrificial self-consecration to the Father's will into the one scene of the agony, making Jesus' act of acceptance the pivot of the whole story of our redemption. Free to escape, free to raise a fanatical insurrection, free to stun the opposition with miracles, Jesus gathers up all his freedom to offer it into the Father's hands. He shows what it costs by revealing his longing that it might be otherwise, calling on the Father with such piercing insistence that the very tone of his 'Abba!' continued to re-echo even among greek-speaking christians; but as in the former temptations, so now in the supreme trial he is immovably attached to the Father's will: 'Not as I will but as thou wilt . . . thy will be done'.<sup>9</sup> This moment is the supreme crisis; none of the pas-

<sup>1</sup> Jn 4, 34.<sup>2</sup> Jn 5, 30.<sup>3</sup> Jn 6, 38.<sup>4</sup> Jn 8, 28-29.<sup>5</sup> Jn 8, 55.<sup>6</sup> Jn 10, 17-18.<sup>7</sup> Jn 14, 31.<sup>8</sup> Jn 12, 27-28.<sup>9</sup> Mt 26, 39, 42.

sion narratives suggest that the conflict in Jesus' soul continued, but rather that this supremely free choice of the Father's will thereafter sustained him in serenity to the end.

Jesus' teaching of obedience to the Father's will is above all by his example, which is centred on his acceptance of the cross, the means of our redemption. But obedience to God's will is also the principal subject of his teaching – as is clear when we realize that this theme is present not only when Jesus speaks of doing God's will, but also whenever he preaches the kingdom of God; this preaching means primarily not the inauguration of an institution but an appeal to man to acknowledge and accept the reign or rule of God. We do not know whether the Lord's Prayer, as Jesus first taught it, contained the petition 'thy will be done', which is absent from Luke's version; but in any case, the essence of the petition is present in the undisputed 'thy kingdom come': that is, 'realize thy reign'.

The theme of obedience to God's will and reign in Jesus' preaching is too vast even to permit of a summary in this article, which is concerned rather with Jesus' personal attitude. Here let us consider only a few sayings on the subject which especially reveal that attitude. For Jesus, obedience to the Father is all that matters, more than either outward attachment to himself – 'Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven'<sup>1</sup> – or even blood-relationship: 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'.<sup>2</sup> This relationship to Jesus, constituted by setting one's duty as a child of God above all else, must take the place of natural ties of blood,<sup>3</sup> and it means sharing Jesus' cross, as he shows in the same context. The call to take up the cross and follow Jesus is not explicitly related to God's will, but it is implicitly, since God's will for Jesus meant above all the cross. The johannine equivalent of the saying about self-denial and the cross promises the Father's approval to all who 'hate their own life' and follow Jesus: 'If any one serves me, he must follow me . . . if any one serves me, the Father will honour him'.<sup>4</sup>

Thus for us as for Jesus, the will of God must transcend every other call, and for us as for Jesus it means the cross. The imitation of Christ is not concerned with this or that detail of his life or behaviour; it is concerned with self-consecration to the Father's will and accepting the cross.

<sup>1</sup> Mt 7, 21.

<sup>2</sup> Mk 3, 35.

<sup>3</sup> Mt 10, 37; Lk 14, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 12, 26.

In considering Jesus' knowledge and acceptance of the Father's will, we have also seen what it enjoined in particular: the incarnation, the salvation of the world through the freely-accepted sacrifice of the cross, and men's acceptance of salvation and therefore of its means, the cross, through faith in Christ. Now let us consider further not only the objects but also the characteristics of God's will as revealed in Jesus. We shall see that they are equally characteristics of Jesus himself. What he tells us about the Father's will is at the same time the most intimate revelation of his own person as Son and Word of God. 'He who has seen me has seen the Father'.<sup>1</sup>

*The Father's will is loving.*

'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life'.<sup>2</sup> God's loving will controls all the world; 'not one sparrow falls to the ground without your Father's will'.<sup>3</sup> If he cares for the birds and flowers, much more does he for men;<sup>4</sup> if imperfect human fathers show love to their children, much more 'will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him'.<sup>5</sup> Only love which transcends human dislikes and enmities can be worthy of sons of such a Father: 'I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust'.<sup>6</sup>

This loving will is totally satisfied in Jesus, 'my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased'. 'For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life'.<sup>7</sup> 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends'.<sup>8</sup> In the upper room where Jesus instituted the new covenant in his blood, that new covenant which according to Jeremiah was to be written in men's hearts,<sup>9</sup> he renewed the commandments of God and summed them up in one new commandment, 'that you love one another, even as I have loved you'.<sup>10</sup> Jesus has power to sum up the expressions of God's will, and he can point to his own love to show what his summing-up means. The quality of that love of his is shown in his free acceptance of the cross.

<sup>1</sup> Jn 14, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 3, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Mt 10, 29.

<sup>4</sup> Mt 6, 26-30.

<sup>5</sup> Mt 7, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Mt 5, 44-45.

<sup>7</sup> Jn 10, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Jn 15, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Jer 31, 31-34.

<sup>10</sup> Jn 13, 34.



*The Father's will is salvific.*

This has already been sufficiently illustrated as regards the divine plan for the salvation of the world, to be worked out by the cross. So far, the cross alone has been emphasized, not the resurrection; but this is the completion of God's salvific plan. The Father, 'who was able to save him from death',<sup>1</sup> willed that Jesus should freely drink the cup of suffering to the last drop, but only in order to raise him from the dead. The resurrection is the Father's work, as the early speeches in Acts repeatedly emphasize. By the Father's will and by obedience to it, Christ could now communicate his life to those who would join him in that obedience: 'being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him'.<sup>2</sup> It is the Father's will that all who are joined to Christ by faith should share in his resurrection: 'This is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day'.<sup>3</sup> Again we see the Son's will revealed with the Father's: 'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly'.<sup>4</sup> His sacrifice to the Father is his flesh 'for the life of the world';<sup>5</sup> the same will is shown in the synoptic saying 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'.<sup>6</sup> Here there is an echo of Isaiah,<sup>7</sup> just as in St Paul's 'by one man's obedience many will be made righteous';<sup>8</sup> it is through the saving and justifying power of Jesus' obedience that we 'have access in one Spirit to the Father'.<sup>9</sup>

*The Father's will is transcendent and often terrible.*

'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God'.<sup>10</sup> Man plans without reference to God's will and is brought back to reality with a brutal shock: 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you'.<sup>11</sup> Even Peter in his loyal affection must be brusquely set right and given a lesson in the transcendence of God's values.<sup>12</sup> How terrible the Father's will, that same loving, salvific will, can be is revealed above all in Jesus' agony as he faces the cup which the Father inexorably holds out to him. 'He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all', cries St Paul, 'will he not also give us all things with him?'<sup>13</sup> Yes, and not less than he gave to his own Son: 'my cup indeed you shall drink'.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Heb 5, 7.<sup>2</sup> Heb 5, 9.<sup>3</sup> Jn 6, 40.<sup>4</sup> Jn 10, 10.<sup>5</sup> Jn 6, 51.<sup>6</sup> Mk 10, 45.<sup>7</sup> Isai 53, 12.<sup>8</sup> Rom 5, 19.<sup>9</sup> Eph 2, 18.<sup>10</sup> Heb 10, 31.<sup>11</sup> Lk 12, 20.<sup>12</sup> Mt 16, 23.<sup>13</sup> Rom 8, 32.<sup>14</sup> Mt 20, 23.

As Jesus knew, understood and freely accepted the Father's will in all its unimaginable transcendence, so he shared it. His own sayings reveal God's sternness no less than his love. 'Then will I declare to them: I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers'.<sup>1</sup> 'It would have been better for that man if he had not been born'.<sup>2</sup> John represents Jesus as challenging his opponents with bad faith and with resisting the evidence they were capable of recognizing. He confronts them in his own divine transcendence: 'you are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world',<sup>3</sup> and convicts them of having no true love and knowledge of the God they claim to worship; rather, they are acting like children of the devil.<sup>4</sup> In these terrible words we hear the voice of no merely human petulance but of absolute Truth when confronted with bad will. The will revealed in Jesus is no less loving and salvific, but the aspect of it which human sinfulness now encounters is a terrible one.

*Christ's relationship to the Father's will is the key to his Person.*

Here we come to the heart of the mystery of Jesus' devotion to the Father's will. We have seen that he knew it, revealed it, did it and taught us to do it; but all this is not to be understood merely in the way that one man knows another's intentions, fulfils them and explains them to others. Nor is any ordinary human obedience to God simply like Christ's. If in obedience to God I resist a temptation to sin and teach others to do likewise, I have done my duty as a creature of God, but neither my understanding nor my willing nor my teaching has been on the same level as Christ's. He has a human understanding and a human will, proper to his human nature, body and soul, but he is not a human person; that is, in Christ the self-possessing and subsistent centre and source of responsible human acts is not established as an entity distinguishable from his eternal divine Person. The Person of Christ is divine only; his acts through his human nature were truly human (or more correctly, divine-human) but their source is entirely divine.

The Person of Christ is never more clearly revealed in St John than with reference to the Father's will.<sup>5</sup> 'The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise'.<sup>6</sup> 'The living Father sent

<sup>1</sup> Mt 7, 23.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 26, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 8, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 8, 39ff.

<sup>5</sup> A careful reading of Jn 5-8, 10, 13-17 is necessary for a proper appreciation of this.

<sup>6</sup> Jn 5, 19.

me, and I live because of the Father'.<sup>1</sup> 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me'.<sup>2</sup> 'If you knew me, you would know my Father also'.<sup>3</sup> 'He who has seen me has seen the Father . . . Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?'.<sup>4</sup>

Theology teaches us that the divine Persons do not first subsist independently and then in relation to one another. It is by relationship alone that they are distinct; the first Person in that he begets the Son and breathes forth the Holy Spirit, the second Person in that he is begotten by the Father and sends the Holy Spirit from the Father, the third Person in that he proceeds from the Father through the Son, as from one principle. The whole being of the second Person is to be *ad Patrem*, sonship personified. Revealed in human guise, this meant Jesus' life and death as we know them; Jesus' devotion to the Father's will is the visible revelation of what constitutes his divine Person.

It is into this relationship that we are taken up when we come to be 'in Christ', led by the Holy Spirit to be sons and daughters of God the Father in Christ the Son. To grow in the Christ-life is to become more and more 'relational', more and more dead to self and alive to God, more and more simply centred on the Father's will, till in Christ we can say, and know that thereby we are saying everything that it is of any importance to say about ourselves: 'I live because of the Father'.

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 6, 57.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 4, 34.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 8, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 14, 9-10.