

# THE WILL OF GOD

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

**G**OD IS A great one for working with the materials on hand; which, perhaps, is why Jesus was a village carpenter. The Creator of all is a past-master at making something out of nothing, silk purses out of sows' ears. He can bring order out of chaos and make saints out of sinners. He does not demand ideal people and ideal working conditions; he is always prepared to work within the limitations of our human condition in order to transform them from within. He, the infinite and eternal, is always readier than we are to work in and through space and time with such patient attention to the minutest detail that even the hairs on our heads are numbered. It is he, and not we, who totally accepts our human history as the raw material of salvation. He is found at work not in nostalgic yearnings for the good old bygone days, nor in fantasies about a future utopia, but in the dynamic, creative here and now. None of us can say what God's will for us is to be in ten years' time or even next year, or even tomorrow; but we can always know what God wants us to do now.

'The will of God' is a vague phrase whose true meaning is obscured by our own strange imaginings. Sometimes I get the impression from writers that there is this great 'plan of God': an eternal blueprint (computerized by now, I hope) that God seeks to impose on a recalcitrant human race. If there is such a divine plan, it seems to have gone awry at some very early stage. I am further puzzled when that 'divine plan' seems to refer only to Christians (though with a passing nod to Jews), or, even worse, only to roman catholic Christians. What, I ask myself, is the place of the rest, the majority of the human race? And where does neanderthal man, whom I feel is sadly neglected, fit in? I am even more perplexed when I listen to my fundamentalist friends proclaim that one fine day God is going to bring the whole process of history to a violent halt that will send most of us through the windscreen. This attitude seems to push God out of his world, making of him Hardy's 'President of the Immortals', who manipulates us from afar and casts us off when we do not fit in with his plan. We end up with a big brother God, who smiles when we conform but gets very nasty when we do not.

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Such an understanding of God denies all that we believe in when we say 'God became man'. We proclaim Jesus as Lord, as Emmanuel, God in our midst. God is without doubt beyond us, but as someone has said, he is the beyond within us. The only God we know is the God who comes to us in history, who is covenanted by his own desire to the human task in all its facets. He is with us not as one who is beside us, but as one who is in us, in the innermost depths of our being and of all that is. The intimacy of this relationship confounds rational understanding and logical expression; it is known only in the heart, in that central core of our true being where God dwells as in his own home. Jesus prayed for a oneness to which of ourselves we would not dare to aspire, 'that they all may be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us'. The relationship of Jesus to the Father in the Spirit is not a blueprint or model out there that we must imitate. We are an integral part of that relationship by the gift of God who has chosen freely that it be so. Hence it is that our lives are hidden with Christ in God, and that in him we live and move and have our being.

Such a compenetration of being invites us to reflect on the will of God in a totally new light, the light that is Christ, who is our life, and through whom all things were made. Christ does not invite us to experience God, as current jargon has it, but to know the God of our experience. He assures us that our own human experience, and the experience of human history, is where we shall find the will of God. The mystery of Christ's life, of his seeking to do the will of his Father, is the mystery of my life and of my seeking to do the will of our Father.

Christ assures me that the kingdom of God is within me, in all that is truly me and makes up my life. The will of God does not demand an ideal me in an ideal situation; it is to be found in myself as I am, here and now, with my gifts and my sinfulness. Jesus found the will of God in his fidelity to the purity and simplicity of the Jewish tradition. His people had come to know God through the kaleidoscope of their own history. He was the God whom their father Abraham had known in the desert and on the mountain; the God whom they had known in the Exodus and on Sinai; the God of their exile and return. This same God Jesus found in his years at Nazareth, the God of human experience, seen in the flowers of the field and the fisherman's net, in the sower of seed and the growth of a plant, in the lives of ordinary people going about their business.

Jesus does not discourse about God in theological terms, but he opens our eyes to his own experience of God, summed up in the intimacy of 'Abba', 'Daddy'.

It was this intimacy with his Father that made it possible for Jesus to be led by the Spirit to do the Father's will on earth as it is in heaven. His life tells us that the kingdom of God, the way God works in this world, is through the deep relationship of love that binds us to him, a relationship that itself is not simply personal, but a person, the holy Spirit of love poured into our hearts. To seek and find the will of God we must enter freely into that relationship with the Father through the Spirit of Jesus who invites us to follow him. All that Jesus was and did flowed from his relationship. If he was totally above seeking the approval or fearing the disapproval of men, it was because he sought only the approval of his Father. He could see the necessity of the Law and could tranquilly break it, because he understood that it is impossible to legislate for love. Such was his trust that he could even find his Father's loving will in failure, rejection and ignominy. All who seek to do his Father's will he sees as his blood relations, mother, brother, sister.

But what in practice does seeking and finding the will of God imply? It implies first of all that I accept myself in the here and now as God accepts me. My only starting point is the real me. I know myself up to a point with my goodness and my evil. I have to come before God in the realization that only he can work through me what he wishes to accomplish. So I come before God in my ignorance, my weakness and my poverty. I seek God's will; and the prerequisite has to be my admission that I do not know what his will is. I may have spiritual ambitions; but no matter how good these may seem to me they may still not be what God wants of me. Perhaps the trouble is that in an activist society we tend to think in terms of doing and action. When we ask, 'what is God's will for me?', we can mean in our own minds, 'what does God want me to do?' But before we ever start doing, the will of God has to express itself in our being.

God is being. Neither masculine, feminine nor neuter, he simply is. He calls each of us to be. And to be what? Simply to be my unique self, and consequently to be able to express that self in whatever I may do. What I do may not always be what I would choose to do. No one chooses to be sick or imprisoned. But I can be certain that if I seek first to be, and being is the kingdom of God, no matter what I do I shall be doing the will of God who wants me first of all

to be as he sees me, one who is made in his image and likeness. But to arrive at that point (and I shall never fully arrive), I must trust myself totally to the God in whom I live and move and have my being. The desire of my life has to be a hunger for being rather than for accomplishment. I may gain the whole world but unless I become my real self it will be literally nothing. St Bernard once said to his monks that the whole purpose of their lives was to love and to be lovable. That in essence is what life is about and what the will of God is about. He is love; and how can he want anything else of us than that we become, like him, lovers of our fellow human beings and of his creation in its infinite variety and wonder? Without that love nothing has any value, as St Paul reminds us in his hymn to love.

Love is God's being, and his will is that it become mine, for where charity and love abide, there God is. After all, God can only want what is best for me; and what could be better than that I grow in that divine power of love that he has communicated to me as part of his own being? Jesus came to call people to become lovers, even of their enemies. His whole message was to persuade people to love even as their heavenly Father loves. Jesus was not an organizer, an executive or even a man of action. The mystery of his life lay deeper: on that level to which each of us must return through the doorway of death; and on the other side of that doorway there will be nothing to do and everything to be.

A few weeks before his death, St Ignatius, in a letter to a fellow Jesuit, wrote that none of us can know for certain in this life how far we are furthering or hindering what God is trying to work through us. A powerful statement from the author of the thirty days exercises, designed to help a person to seek and find the will of God. But before the greatness of God none of us can be complacent. None of us can claim to have reached the fulness of our potential. We must learn to live in an attitude of search and peaceful questioning. We have to resist the temptation to settle down into a comfortably pious routine. Our search for the will of God is a search for our true selves, and along the road there will always be a false self to be discarded. Such an excoriating experience will always be painful as growth is painful. One of the most difficult things in life is to admit that we have still to keep on growing, and to give ourselves to that process with a generous heart.

I come before God in my weakness and impotence. I come before him in the acute and humbling realization that my weaknesses and

shortcomings blind me to what God seeks to work through me. I have to realize in prayer that I cannot do God's will of myself. I have to know interiorly, in my inmost heart, that the very idea that I, a weak, limited, sinful human being, cannot be the instrument of the infinite power of God. What have I to offer to God? What is there in me that could possibly lead him to choose me to accomplish his will? Such was the spiritual experience of the prophets who all sensed deeply their nothingness before God. Such was the experience of Peter before the mystery of the person of Jesus.

This may seem to go against the current of healthy psychology that seeks to rid a person of a bad self-image. But this is not a question of having a bad self-image. It is simply a matter of touching reality, which means meeting the One who is real, God. God is reality and his reality is love. He is not one before whom we have to prove ourselves. His very nature is to think that we are worthwhile. He just loves us, and nothing we can do can ever stop him loving us. He even died because of our sins. We may have a bad image of ourselves, but it is a false bad image. As we come before God we find our true image, realistic in that we see our sinfulness, but not debilitating because we come upon the wonder of an infinite personal love of each of us, as we really are.

The reason why I can seek the will of God is because I am not grounded in myself but simply in his all-powerful love. He has chosen me, he has loved first. Because of this I can do all things, and without him I can do nothing. Better still, I should not want to do anything without him, because he is reality and what I do without him is unreal. If he is my being, what I do without him is not an expression of my being.

To enter into my nothingness before God is not a form of self-destruction but an entrance into the source of real power: the power to love. The more my life is grounded in the power of God, the more he can work through me in ways that I may never understand in this life. I have to learn not to want to see myself doing the will of God, but to be ready to share the darkness of Calvary in loving trust. Ultimately, the desire to do the will of God comes down to trusting myself to him totally and completely. The more I really entrust myself to God the more he can work in me. Consequently there should be no diffidence in my action. There is no need for me to be like the cat in the adage, dithering over what I should do. I should always fear that my self-centredness interferes with God's will. I should always fear that my egotism creates a bias towards

self. But that fear is healthy in that it robs me of my complacency. If I admit that I am a crooked line then God is able to write straight with me. He may write in a language that I do not understand. But that does not matter. As long as he understands it, and I know he does, that is sufficient.

However, I can always be sure of one thing, no matter what I may choose to do; as long as I do it lovingly, I am doing the will of God. The will of God is our peace; which means working towards reconciliation, compassion, and an ever-expanding love for the whole human race. Sin is divisiveness and domination, the manipulation and domination of other people's lives, and by the same token of my own life. Grace, which is the contradictory of sin, is the acceptance of everyone and everything as a gift to be loved.

Jesus loved his world and loved the people he met. His love was deep enough for him to look round in anger, as Mark emphasizes. His doing of his Father's will was to proclaim the good news of love, to put new heart into those who felt they were hopeless and worthless. We can do no better than follow him. Do we ask ourselves, selfishly, 'Am I doing the will of God?' Or should we ask, 'How can I put new heart into those who feel hopeless and helpless?'

We pray 'Thy will be done', but what can the will of God be but that we live by the law of love, sharing our joys and sorrows, our strengths and our weaknesses, refusing to fight our own corners, and becoming like God, who has consistently fought our corner?