

Sunday 22nd April 2018
Thy will be done.

Texts Jn. 17.1-5, Rev.4.1-11

The third petition of the Lord's Prayer still pertains to God. 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' I have emphasized again and again that the starting place in prayer is always regarding God, not our need. Even in a crisis, where there may be only a moment to pray, we are to be concerned with God and His glory. This will prove more effective than any petition not framed in Scripture. Those who die praising God die well, those who live praising God will live well!

The prime motivation in a Christian's life is to be the glory of God. Everything else will pass. When we die, someone else will own our home. Probably the first thing they will do is rip out the kitchen and bathroom and replace it with something which resembles the ones we had replaced, but which have come into fashion again! I suspect my fishing rods will end up supporting climbing plants. What will it matter? We will not be there to see it. However it matters very much where we will be, in Heaven or in Hell, and that should be the great concern of this life, preparing for one and avoiding the other!

The motivation of our living and praying is to be the glory of God. It glorifies God when He is our focus, when our concern is that His Kingdom be expressed in the world, and that His will is done on earth. The qualifier, 'as it is in heaven,' applies to all three petitions. Our sense of need is not the motivation of our praying, but the glory of God. It is possible, and frequently happens, that our prayer is motivated out of anxiety and from self – concern. This is a difficult thing to face, but even in the most desperate situation what matters is not our will, or our preference, but the honour and glory of God.

John 17 is called the High Priestly prayer of Christ. It is on the eve of the crucifixion, and how does Jesus begin His prayer? 'Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.' Jesus is not concerned primarily about what He is about to suffer, but that God be glorified in Him, that the Kingdom come and God's will be done there on earth as it is in heaven. Anyone who does not see the perfection of manhood of Christ in this is indeed blind! What a wonderful man!

The desire for the glory of God was also shown in the life of John the Baptist. Do you remember the exchange he spoke of to some of his disciples? John said regarding Christ that He must increase, and John must decrease. Now there is a manly man as well! The way of the world is desire for ever increasing honour and glory, but John chose the glory of Christ over his own. Do you remember the details of John's death? He was imprisoned and beheaded over a promise to a dancer! You can't get a more ignominious death than that! John's disciples buried his body, but we do not know whether they got his head to bury as well, or if that was lost!

The whole tone of the rest of Jesus prayer as recorded in John 17 is concerning the glory of God. We have the account of the final hours before His arrest, and the desperate and agonized session of prayer in the garden where Christ is faced with the

coming hours of pain, shame, rejection and cruel death. He wrestles with this as a man, and comes in Matt. 26v39 to the final petition, that 'God's will be done,' even at the cost of His life. We are called upon in the Lord's Prayer to be of such a disposition. It may not come to this for us in this nation, but believers have lived and died under persecution in every age of the Church and in different places of the world. Don't think it cannot happen here, because Britain, over the centuries, has had many Christian martyrs.

This third petition builds on the first two. In one sense the whole prayer is a unity that belongs and flows perfectly together. It is legitimate to analyse each part, but then we must put it back together and pray it as a whole with enlightened understanding of the thrust and direction it is taking us in. These petitions flow and circle back on each other. In one sense, when we ask what the will of God is, we already have been given the answer. The will of God is that His Name be hallowed and His kingdom come. When Paul says we are to pray continuously, it can mean this, that praying these priorities in the Lord's Prayer do not come to an end until the end of the world and the coming of Christ and the end.

I mentioned earlier that the qualifier of, 'as it is in heaven,' can apply to all three of these first three petitions. Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4 gives us a limited glimpse of the world to come, of heaven, and we are presented with the view of the absolute Majesty, Holiness and Sovereignty of God. In heaven, God's Name is Hallowed, His rule is perfectly served, and His will is not only done, but is the delight and joy of the heavenly beings. This joy, peace, and perfection is what we pray to be manifest on earth. It will eventually be such when the new heaven and earth come, but that is a mystery! In the meantime we have Christ's agenda for prayer, and the will of God stated.

If someone should ask, 'but what about our welfare? What about our happiness?' Well, the long and the short of it is this, if we pray this way, it is the surest way of seeing good come to us.

Let us now turn to the question of what the will of God is, or how can we know what God's will is. In previous times, people have gone to all sorts of lengths to know God's will in the details of life. I can remember a discussion in my youth as to how to know if it is God's will to give to this or that, and how much. Who to date, what job to pursue, what university to go to. All these sorts of matters are in fact second order questions since there are not specific instructions in the Bible regarding these things, They seemed important in our youth, but as we age, we realise that they were not as important as other things such as faith in Christ, growing as a Christian, nurturing our souls, and looking to the future above.

What we did not realise in those days was that Scripture is a full revelation of the will of God and He even indicates the priorities such as the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. These two commands of Christ are the spiritual summery of the first and second group of five of the Ten Commandments. Isn't it wonderful how the Scriptures illuminate themselves!

The starting place, as I am trying to emphasise, is not in the realm of the second order questions, but in the declaration of God's will in Scripture. I can say with absolute confidence, that if we are concerned with the things that concern God, He will look after the things that concern us.

What then does Scripture say about God's will? There are many ways God reveals His will, but here are three ways.

1. God reveals His will by what He says is His will. Not exactly Rocket Science, but missed by so many! There are many Scriptures which say things like this, 1 Thes. 4v3 'It is God's will that you should be sanctified.'

We will do well to pray this for ourselves and others. We will do better if we ask what being sanctified means. It means to be becoming holy, to be becoming like Christ in nature. We will do better still if we ask how this sanctification happens and discover that it is by the working of the indwelling Holy Spirit. We will do even better if we seek to discover how we may nurture and co-operate with the Holy Spirit. We learn that amongst other things, it means to seek fellowship with Christ, to set our affection on Christ rather than on sin, to seek to be obedient, and not neglect His ordinances. Some people say things like this to me. 'I can be just as good a Christian as you and not go to Church.' This is not true. Those who can, but don't go to Church need to ask themselves if they really are believers. It is as blunt as that!

So, look out for verses that say, 'this is the will of God for you...'

2. The second way we can discover what God's will is, is by looking at the Commands of Christ. We look at them and interpret them and consider what reasonable inferences we can draw from them in the light of the rest of Scripture.

Let me give two examples of this. The Great Commandment and the Great Commission. These correspond to the two tables of the Law, the Ten Commandments. The first five relate to man's relationship towards God. This is summarised in the Great Commandment. In this we are told to love God with all our hearts, souls, mind and strength. If this is not as clear a statement as we can get that it is God's will that we love Him supremely, then what does? We are told that our love is to be of heart and soul and mind and strength, which means the whole and core of our being.

This raises implications and questions. Can we do this? Is this something we have to do on our own? The truth is that we are incapable of even knowing our own hearts, so how can we know if we are loving God with our whole hearts! We obviously need God's help, the working of the Holy Spirit within us. In this way the great statement of God's will, and how it may be done is opened out a bit more, and the response should be obvious. If we need God's help to do this, then that brings us back to the importance of praying this petition!

You can work through the same process with the Great Commission which relates to our response to other people. It is God's will that people hear about the Good News. It is important to God that people are told that they can be saved from eternal death by faith in Jesus. Once again, how do people come to faith? We are to tell them, but it takes God to work in them, to open their hearts and grant faith. Once more, this leads us back to the priority of praying, 'Thy will be done,' and telling them about Jesus.

There are so many commands, and if God commands, it is clearly His will and desire that what He commands is done. His commands are therefore statements of His exact will.

3. A third way of knowing God's will is to read the complaints and griefs of God. The OT has many griefs of God. Isaiah 30 begins by God expressing woe to the rebellious Hebrew people. It is legitimate to read this and understand it to imply that the will of God is that they should be like clay in His hands and not rocks. Jesus, you remember wept over Jerusalem because the people in the city did not recognize that Messiah had visited but refused Him. From this it is legitimate to conclude that God's will is that we recognize and respond to His time of visitation.

These revelations of God's will from God's expressions of grief and complaints are very important. We need to understand that we are to be like soft clay in God's hands, letting Him shape and mold our lives. Think of the potter working at his or her wheel. They run the clay up and down to get it into a plastic condition, and then they apply pressure to mold the vessel. The potter uses gentle pressure, but it is enough to force change in the clay. From our perspective, and that of the potter, the pressure is gentle, but from the perspective of the clay, the pressure is life changing!

We don't like events which are life changing, yet it is these, more than anything else that shape us. For example, we have friends who are just about to enter on the empty nest stage of their lives, the children are moving out. This is joy and sadness all at one time!. They are finding it hard! We are just back from the funeral of a friend who died of Flu after six weeks on life support. It is a grief. We have had other friends who have had children with different degrees of genetic damage – everything from a three day life span and upwards. There are illnesses, accidents, job losses, promotions which did not come and so on.

The challenge for Christians is this. Are we able and willing to trust and rest in the dark when on one hand everything seems to have gone wrong, but God's promise is that everything that comes into our lives is either permitted or sent? Yes, it is hard, but faith is for the hard times not only the good. If we will not do this, we could find ourselves actually resisting God's will! What do you think was happening in the garden when Jesus was praying that He may be spared the trial, and not His will, but God's will be done? Jesus was working through these very things, but trusting and becoming submissive to the will of God. It was in this way, He submitted to the Cross which saves us! Why did Jesus go through this garden experience? He did it firstly because it was

God's will for Him to do so, but also, so that as our High Priest, He could sympathise and help us because He has been there and will be with us in our times of trial.

Think about these things because this is where the rubber meets the road in life! Let me summarise why this is important. The truth of the matter is that we live our lives forward, but understand them backwards. Someone famous said that and I can't remember who. This means that many times we just do not know what God is doing in our lives in its various experiences. Joseph did not know till some time later that the brothers sold him meaning it for evil, but God meant it for good. Submit to the hands of the potter, for God redeems every distress to the believer.

The Book of Isaiah, chapters 40 to 66 are sometimes called Isaiah's little book of intercession. They show us how the great events in the history of Israel are all eventually going to be fully redeemed for the salvation of that people and the world. There is a challenge for us, to live in these chapters and grow in our stature as intercessors for the people and nations of the earth.

There is however, another connected declaration of God's will which we must not and dare not miss. I have said a number of times that even though we are dissecting these verses from the Lord's Prayer, we must not leave it a collection of unconnected pieces, but need to put it back together as a whole after we look at its details. This also holds for the Sermon on the Mount as one ordered piece of instruction. We must not separate the Prayer from its context, and its immediate context is an outworking of the Beatitudes.

Let me put it simply. When we pray the agenda of the Lord's Prayer, we do so in the light of the Beatitudes, which are a description of the character of the perfect man Christ. This is the same character which is to grow in every Christian. Hence, the description of the Christian character as found in the Beatitudes is both a commentary of what the Lord's Prayer is about, but also a further guide as to what to pray about.

When the Christ-like character, as shown in the Beatitudes is being manifest in the Christians in a congregation, region and nation, then God's Name is being Hallowed, His Kingdom is present and being expressed, and the will of God is being done. This is why Christ likeness and character is of first importance before what we do. Doing is easy, but to please God, we must firstly be this sort of person!

Next time, on Communion Sunday, we will I hope, take an overview of the Beatitudes. Nothing could be more appropriate for a Communion Service, because Jesus died and was buried and rose again according to Scripture so that we could become Christ's-ones, or Christians!