



Christmas 2, Year C – January 3, 2010

Proverbs 22.1-2,8-9

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Canon M. Ansley Tucker

Listen again to the letter to the Ephesians:

- *God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world*
- *He destined us for adoption... according to the good pleasure of his will*
- *he has made known to us the mystery of his will*

Ephesians 1 is notoriously densely written, but even so, I wonder if, you, too, hear the language of will, and plan, and destiny – and particularly as these relate to God?

In my experience, there are few topics of Christian conversation more likely to get personal, political, agonized, or just plain off the rails than “the will of God.” When an airline passenger just misses the flight that crashes, and says it must have been God’s will for her survive – what does that tell us about God’s will for the other 273 people on the flight manifest? How many times have you heard someone say after the death of a young person, “It must have been God’s will,” or “God obviously needed him more than we do”?

In general, I think we want to believe (and we mostly do) that the universe is friendly, not hostile, and that God wills our ultimate good. And so when bad things happen, we take all the stuff we don’t understand, and we dump it in God’s lap. We take refuge in what we hope and trust must be some benevolent master plan, beyond our mortal comprehension, that works on the principle of short term pain for long term gain.

At the risk of getting entangled in theological complexities which do not lend themselves to short speeches, I thought I would try to map out some more helpful ways of thinking about the will of God for our lives.

Let’s start with two models or scenarios, which in one form or another, have captivated the imagination of many Christians.

In the first scenario, God has a master plan, or a blueprint. When I was an adolescent, it was the blueprint theory that assured me that one day, I would meet Mr Right, and that God had this person picked out for me already. The blueprint is very detailed, including everything from when Jesus is coming back, to what you will be when you grow up, to whether you will cut your finger this afternoon slicing bagels. The blueprint isn’t a very satisfactory view of things, because it essentially leaves us no real freedom to make our own decisions. We may think we’re free, but we’re free the way a freight train is free: we’re moving forward all right, but there’s no leaving the tracks. Sooner or later, what God has in mind will come to pass. The inescapable conclusion is that every single thing that happens is God’s will. This is the kind of thinking that led to a doctrine of “pre-destination” – the idea that some people (usually the ones who think and look like us!) are chosen by God in advance for salvation. Of course, once you accept this theory, it is a short slide to the converse, namely that everyone else must therefore be predestined for damnation. This is the so-called doctrine of “double pre-destination”. It is pretty gruesome stuff – and you’ll be pleased to know that not many Anglicans accept it.

Let’s try a second scenario – where the will of God for humankind could be likened to a game of chess. So, within certain parameters (in this case, the confines

of a chess board, and rules of play) pawns and knights and bishops and such are free to move about as they will. And as they exercise their will, they will create situations which force further choices. Sometimes, bad moves are made which then put the pieces at risk. Notably (just as in real life), bad things don't always happen to people when they make bad choices: sometimes, you dodge the bullet, and the game goes on. Without a doubt this model is more supple, and easier to apply to our lived experience than the blueprint. For one thing, the outcome of the game is not pre-determined, but is contingent rather on the moves which are made. In other words, this model leaves our free will intact. It is also leaves room for tragedy and good fortune to follow as the deserved consequences of choices that are made, and sometimes even for plain good luck – such as when your opponent doesn't realize you're in check!

But this model, too, has its disadvantages. Even if we can think of the pawns, and knights, and bishops moving of their own volition, there are really but finger puppets of the master player – who is willing to sacrifice pawns for the big prize, and maybe even a bishop or two, if necessary. It would be one thing if the pawns were sacrificing themselves, but they aren't, really, are they? God is giving us our heads, as it were, but he's still in the background deciding who is dispensable and who isn't. This doesn't sound to me like the God who favours children, orphans, widows, captives, the poor – in short the most vulnerable in our society,

In other words, we are right we started, asking what, then is the will of God for our lives? How shall we know it?

Let me come clean and say, that I do not believe for one minute that God is interested in micromanaging our decisions or their outcomes. We need to think of the will of God differently, in larger, more expansive terms. In Christian anthropology, just as the mind is the seat of the intellect, the heart is the seat of the will. When it comes to God, I think we have a big tendency to confuse the two. We speak of the will of God as if God was sitting at his drafting table, or his chess board, "figuring out" a plan of action. But when we speak of the heart, we are several steps removed from plans and action. We are talking about desire, about longings, passions. Once you think of the will of God in this way, it becomes much more difficult to imagine God "sending" fire and flood, earthquake, famine, disease, violence or pain – for these are not things which reside in the heart. They cannot, by definition, be part of the will of God.

But what, then, you may ask, *is* the will of God for us? Who is to say that the longings and desires of God are good and worthy and benevolent? This is a question which brings us right to heart of our faith, to what the theologians call "revelation" (the things God has disclosed to us of Godself), and most especially to the witness of Scripture.

And there we learn, that the heart of God is love, and that the will of God therefore moves in the direction of unity – because that's what love does. There are many examples of this in the Christian tradition. St Paul's image of the church as the body of Christ is one of them: the many members, whether honoured or less honoured all belong to the single Body. The eucharist is another: "we being many are one Body, because we all participate in the one Bread/one cup." The Christian imperative to confession and forgiveness, or reconciliation, is precisely about restoring unity.

Do you see what we are saying here? There is no blueprint, which governs everything that happens. The will of God in any situation will be the thing which most perfectly unites and celebrates our commonalities. This is not, after all, the

way we typically lead our lives. We make sense of our selves and our reality by comparing and contrasting – by engaging in what is called “binary thinking.” You know how it goes: You’re tall, I’m short; You’re pretty, I’m cute; you’re nice, I’m smart... We get our sense of ego from our “distinctives.” In business, they call it a “competitive edge” – and your job depends on it.

But the will of God, to quote the gospel of John, is that we all may be one, even as Jesus and the Father are one. This is the canon against which we are to measure our lives, our conversation, our judgments of one another. This is so much the will of God, that at the very centre of our Christian faith is the Incarnation, the birth of Jesus. Why? Because Jesus was the perfect intersection between heaven and earth, between God and humanity – he held opposites together in a perfect unity. And in this, he is our example.

Or, to put all this back into the words of the Letter to the Ephesians:

With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure [there is the heart, again] that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Amen, and so be it.