

Medicine of the Person  
Prague, 23 – 26 July 2003

Bible Study  
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Matthew 26, 36-46  
**Jesus at Gethsemane**

*Jesus then came with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there to pray.' He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee. Distress and anguish overwhelmed him, and he said to them, 'My heart is ready to break with grief. Stop here and stay awake with me.' Then he went on a little farther, threw himself down and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Yet not my will but yours.'*

*He came back to the disciples and found them asleep; and he said to Peter, 'What could none of you stay awake with me for one hour? Stay awake, and pray that you may be spared the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak'.*

*He went away a second time and prayed: 'My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to pass me by without drinking it, your will be done.' He came again and found them asleep, for their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away again a third time, using the same words as before.*

*Then he came to the disciples and said to them, 'Still asleep? Still resting? The hour has come! The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Up, let us go! The traitor is upon us.'*

Just how free is our will? That is the question we are considering together over these few days. In Matthew's account we see a man who subjected his will to that of another and made this other will his own, and, I believe, made this choice freely.

That occasion in the garden in Gethsemane was not the first time that Jesus followed God's will, since being of the same nature as God, he had decided much earlier to submit to his father's will and become man. After Jesus became man, he found himself faced with the trials of the human condition, such as fear, doubt, and weakness. This means that in the garden, he had to subject himself to God again. By then, he was totally aware of the suffering which awaited him.

There is no doubt that this was one of the most difficult moments in his life, because even those closest to him left him alone. So he was distressed by what was going to happen to him, alone before God. Here I see very clearly Christ's humanity and think that this experience in Gethsemane means that even today he can understand what we feel when faced with difficult situations and decisions. With some decisions, there may be one particular choice that we as Christians should make, but which for a variety of reasons, we don't want to or can't make, or just cannot manage to. An example which comes to mind are those "half-truths" or "white

lies” which we hear so often now. We frequently find ourselves in a situation where a “little white lie” or “being economical with the truth” would be the most comfortable option. The choice on these occasions – between the whole truth and a “little” lie – is not a major one, but it is little decisions of this kind which make a difference in our everyday lives and “living with others”.

So I find it comforting to know that God is with me as I decide and that he understands my position, since it is precisely because Jesus lived through difficult situations like these that he understands how uneasy I am and how difficult it can be sometimes to make the right decision. And I like to believe that even if I do not make the right choice, he will forgive me if I admit I was wrong.

In his letter to the Philippians (2, 12-13), the Apostle Paul urges us to live in the fear of God, giving ourselves to him totally and he recalls at the same time that God never abandons us but rather does exactly the opposite; God works in us inspiring both the will and the deed. But how can I call on this strength to carry out the deed? I have no definitive answer to this question. But what I do know is that when I do make the right decision, I always find the strength to make more, as in the case of opting for the truth.

But to go back to the garden: what finally pushed Jesus to subject his will to that of another? There were surely many reasons but I would like to mention just two: his obedience to his father and above all his love for men. He knew that his decision to suffer death on the cross would have the most profound consequences for humanity and that only he could do this. His main motivation was love. This is why he subjected his own wishes to the will of his father whose wishes he shared. There are many situations in life where we cannot say that our decisions are completely free, but it is nevertheless my view that in the field of religion, our freedom to decide is considerable. Our “religious will” is certainly affected by our upbringing and our surroundings, yet our freewill with regard to God is the very foundation of our Christianity. Life as a Christian presupposes a decision. We are not born Christians, we can only become Christians by conscious choice. Our next step is then to decide to do God’s will as Jesus Christ clearly showed us and as we pray every time we say the “Our Father”: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. This prayer asks that God’s will assert itself throughout the world. I have always wondered as I said these words, whether I have really thought seriously about them: what is God’s will, and what does it mean for me in concrete terms? And what must I do so that God’s will be done?

The Bible tells us some things about God’s will in general. Jesus himself says it very precisely, his father’s will is that whoever sees the Son and believes in him, will have eternal life and be raised on the last day (John 6, 40). The question that I must then ask myself is: am I contributing consciously or unconsciously to making God known and helping others to see the need to come close to him? Two verses before, Jesus says that he himself came down to earth not to do his own will but the will of the one who sent him. As we see in what happened at Gethsemane, it was not always easy for him. Jesus knew what awaited him and was, obviously, distressed by it. He was so distressed that he prayed to God three times to ask if there was no other way, and three times, he bowed to the will of God once more.

For Jesus then, the will of God was unequivocal. But what about God's will for my life, particularly in concrete situations? For example, how should I be using my time? If God wants us to do his will, and if we join in with this wish, does God have a right to be a co-decider on how we manage our time? Just now, an important question for me is seeing what I can do to introduce more meaning into my relationships with my partner, my family and my profession. The Christian principles given to us by the word of God certainly help but nevertheless, individual decisions in concrete situations have many facets: in addition to our Christian principles, we must take into account the standards of our society and also our personal experience. It is reassuring to know that God promised to be by our side, to accompany us and to rejoice if we invite him into the decisions in our lives.

In the first letter of John, 5, 14, we are told that God listens to our prayer if we make requests which accord with his will. But doesn't that restrict our will? I do not think that it restricts our freedom of action, because God gave us the freedom to decide for ourselves whether to act in accordance with or against his will. The only problem is how to see what is best for us. Since we know that God seeks our good and that we are not just a tiny cog in his wheel, we can have total confidence in him. His response to our prayers will be what is best for us. Insofar as God allows us free will and freedom of action, he has conferred great responsibility on us. It follows that this responsibility is not only vis-à-vis God and others but also ourselves.

I feel that trying to discern the will of God makes our lives less comfortable. And yet, God does not just demand, he also gives. He removes our doubts and offers us reassurance, because confidence in God and his presence in our lives removes fear. And since fear can prevent us from deciding, this confidence in God also gives us the courage to decide.

Translation : Patricia Wimberley