

“God Willing”

I don't know about you, but I have a slight problem with the gospel parable of the man invited to the wedding feast. The moral of the story is not to be presumptuous – that if we sit toward the top of the table, someone more important might have been invited and to make a space for them, we would be asked to move lower down. Instead, the story recommends that we sit toward the foot of the table in the first place so as to avoid such an embarrassing experience. But then if we deliberately sit at the foot of the table is it because we know our place, or is it because we hope the host will come and ask us to move higher and everyone will see it happen?

Something of the same conundrum can occur when it comes to trying to do God's will. How much of an effort do we put into trying honestly and prayerfully to determine God's will for us? Rather do we convince ourselves that what we want to do must surely also be what God's wants us to do? How do we know whether our choices are right, or whether we have merely convinced ourselves of the rightness of what we wanted to do all along? And if the outcome turns out not to be what we wanted, do we accept that perhaps we were wrong or is it easier to blame God for not listening to our prayers?

In his *Confessions*, St Augustine says: “All ask what they wish, but do not always hear the answer that they wish” and suggests that we should be not so much concerned to hear from God what we will as to will what we hear from him. Further food for thought comes from St Cyprian, commenting on the petition in the Lord's Prayer that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven:

Because the devil prevents us from obeying God completely in mind and in deed, we pray that we may will what God wills: humility in conduct, steadfastness in faith, modesty in speech, justice in actions, mercy in deeds, discipline in morals...to keep peace with our brothers and sisters, to love God with one's whole heart, preferring nothing to Christ...This is what it means to be a co-heir with Christ, to accomplish the command given by God, to fulfil the will of the Father.

When the rich young man approached Jesus and asked him what he must do to inherit the kingdom, he really didn't expect to hear anything in Our Lord's reply that he wasn't already doing. In his self-righteousness he was convinced that all was well between himself and God and Jesus would figuratively pat him on the head and say “Well done good and faithful servant - carry on”. However he was in for a bit of a shock because things weren't in fact as they should have been and while his external actions and religious practices may well have been laudable, his wealth and possessions were getting in the way. That was the one thing the young man was trying to deny (at least to himself) but it was also the

very thing that Jesus pointed to. If he really didn't want to know the answer, then he really shouldn't have asked the question. And this is how it is with us every time we seek God's will. Do we really want to know what his will is and are we prepared to accept and live with his answer? As convinced as we may be that God must surely agree with us, it may not necessarily be the case given that God knows what is best for us in a given situation. How, then, might we be more sure of God's will?

St Ignatius of Loyola was a great proponent of divining the will of God by what he called *discernment of spirits* – more of that in a moment. But his early attempts at discernment weren't always as theological as they might have been. Ignatius had developed a tremendous devotion to Our Lady and it is recorded in his biography that one day he was riding along on his mule when he caught up with a Muslim Moor and, in the course of their conversation, the Moor had said one or two things which Ignatius felt were offensive to Our Lady. So incensed was he that, from his still recent military background, he felt the only chivalrous things to do was to kill the Moor, but at the same time his newly re-acquired faith cautioned him against such an act. As they came to a fork in the road, Ignatius dropped the reins of his mule so God could show him what he should do. If the mule followed the path taken by the Moor he would take it as a sign that he should go after him and kill him, but if the mule took the other path then the Moor's life would be saved and the latter is what happened!

Ignatius' later and more refined process of discerning God's will had its roots in his experience as a soldier, confined to bed whilst recovering from a severe wound to his leg. He had asked for something to read to help pass the time but all that was to hand was a book of romantic stories of chivalry and a book of the lives of Christ and the saints. While the former was in keeping with his courtly lifestyle, he found that the pleasure he gained from those stories was short-lived whereas when he read about Christ and the saints he found the inspiration they produced was much longer-lasting and, in due course, would be a major influence on the new and unexpected direction his life would take. It is that aspect of the results of our choices that is central to Ignatius' teaching on the discernment of spirits and which he refers to as *consolation* and *desolation*.

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St Ignatius writes:

I call it consolation when an interior movement is aroused in the soul, by which it is inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord... I call consolation every increase of faith, hope, and love, and all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one's soul by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord. I call desolation what is entirely opposite of (that): darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from disturbances and temptations which lead to want of faith, hope and love.

It is characteristic of God (when he) acts upon the soul, to give true happiness and spiritual joy, and to banish all the sadness and disturbances which are caused by the enemy. It is characteristic of the evil one to fight against such happiness and consolation by proposing fallacious reasonings, subtleties, and continual deceptions. It is a mark of the evil spirit to assume the appearance of an angel of light. He begins by suggesting thoughts that are suited to a devout soul, and ends by suggesting his own.

We must carefully observe the whole course of our thoughts. If the beginning and middle and end are wholly good and directed to what is entirely right, it is a sign that they are from the good angel. But the course of thoughts suggested to us may terminate in something distracting, or less good than the soul had formerly proposed to do. It may end in what weakens the soul, or disquiets it...destroying the peace, tranquillity, and quiet which it had before (causing) disturbance to the soul. These things are a clear sign that the thoughts are proceeding from the evil spirit.¹

When we seek God's will we must do so prayerfully and persistently, creating within ourselves a spirit conducive to peacefully listening for, and perceiving, God's response, detaching ourselves completely from any sort of predisposed expectation of what that response might be. Only in that way can we be truly open to all possibilities and therefore that which is God's will. As and when we are sure of what we feel God is telling us, we should follow his lead and do what we feel he is calling us to do, but, as Ignatius cautions, we must test the spirits along the way. If what we feel we were led to do continues to produce a good feeling and peace of soul, then that would be a good sign. If, however, we begin to experience disquiet and a lack of peace within ourselves, then it is possible we may have made a mistake and our choice (or part of it) wasn't God's will after all. I say "part of it" because it's always possible that we set out on the right path, but were somehow led astray at some point in which case we have to go back in our minds to the point at which the disquiet and disturbance of soul began and try to discover what went wrong - if indeed we are sure things were right up to that point. It may be, however, that things were never quite as right as we thought and that our initial decision may have been more our own will than God's, in which case we need to begin the process again and hopefully this time discern his will correctly.

In seeking God's will through prayer of petition, we have to be open to the fact that our prayers may not always be answered in the way we hoped they would be. We might pray quite sincerely that God's will be done and yet, as we said earlier, we can be so convinced that our will and his must be the same that we

¹ *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, Louis J Puhl SJ (Loyola University Press).

just don't understand why our prayers appear not to have been answered – especially when they are about things like illness and suffering. In his lengthy pastoral *Letter to Proba*, Saint Augustine writes:

If something happens contrary to our prayer, we should bear it patiently, give thanks in all circumstances, and have not the least doubt that it was more opportune for God's will to be done than our own. The Mediator gave us this kind of example. When he said, 'Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me', he then changed the human will that was in him and immediately added, 'But not what I will, but what you will, Father.'

As Isaiah says, God's ways are not our ways, and his thoughts not our thoughts. Some things are beyond our understanding and remain, in the theological sense, a 'mystery'. God always hears our prayers and those that are offered worthily will always be answered - perhaps not always in the way we hoped for, but in a way that God knows to be better for us - and not necessarily exactly when we expect (or demand!), but at a time that he knows to be more appropriate.

In his "No, Slow, Grow, Let's go" response to the experience of unanswered prayer, American pastor Bill Hybels writes:

If the request is wrong, God will say, "No." Maybe the request is harmful in ways you don't understand. Maybe the request is self-serving, shortsighted, or even too small. God might have something better in mind, and he's saying no to this one because he has a better plan. **If the timing is wrong, God will say, "Slow."** Like children, we dislike the words, "Not yet," as God shakes his head at us. God has reasons for his "Not yet's"; we must not insist we know better than. We tend to be much more concerned about comfort and convenience than about building character through patiently waiting on and trusting in God's timing. **If you are wrong, God will say, "Grow."** It's a lot easier to point the finger at God for not answering prayer than it is to look in the mirror and to say, "Maybe I'm the problem." Change your attitude on this or that. Stop that practice. End that pattern. Reconcile that relationship. Soften up in your spirit. Repent; receive forgiveness. **When the timing is right, God will say, "Let's go!"** and our prayer will be answered.

Knowing how important it is to seek and do God's will, the invitation at all times is to then humbly and trustfully accept whatever his will turns out to be. In the seeking, the finding and the accepting, his grace is there to help us.

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