

December 19, 2010

## **The Fourth Sunday of Advent**

Matthew 1:18-25

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

*The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector*

### **Thy Will Be Done**

Some of you will remember coming across Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development at some point in your past. He identified a number of 'stages' in our moral development from avoiding pain to following rules, to a kind of law and order orientation, and on to questioning and moral universalism. You can see every one of these 'stages' at play in the torturous process by which we seem to be moving towards allowing gay and lesbian people to serve in the United States military. A changing social contract is very confusing and seems deeply wrong to people who believe that morality is expressed and enforced in law that enshrines social norms by which we know whether we are being good or not.

There are plenty of other and parallel developmental theories relating to development in how we learn<sup>1</sup>, psychosocial development<sup>2</sup>, and even stages of development in faith<sup>3</sup>. If we are honest, most of us can recognize some of these developmental realities in ourselves. I think it was through studying English that I began to grasp that I was not being measured on getting the right answer as much as I was on appropriate reflection and insight. Ironically, for me, that led me away from enjoying reading fiction --- a pleasure I am only now recovering. I think it was the day at UNC when I made a C in a class on Chaucer that I realized I was simply done with literary criticism. I knew how to do it, but it really wasn't capturing my interest any more, and I think I lost the baby --- my enjoyment of reading fiction --- along with the bathwater --- my desire to mostly about making good grades. The skill that I had learned was not really going to be in play until I became interested in a new way in reading the Bible, and left behind a kind of searching it for answers to the questions of life.

I also recognize in myself a similar kind of development in my understanding of God's will. If you have been in church this Advent, you know that we have been looking at the scriptures of this season through the lens of the Lord's Prayer. As we draw near to the birth and infancy stories that are at the heart of Christmas we cannot avoid a scriptural sense of inevitability about the remarkable conception and birth of Jesus, and the extraordinary faith of a young woman who becomes pregnant before marriage and embraces fully that reality. In Luke's version of the story, Mary says to the angel "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to thy word."<sup>4</sup> In Matthew's rather different story (with our ghastly

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Piaget

<sup>2</sup> Erik Erikson

<sup>3</sup> James Fowler; John Westerhoff

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:38

and prudish translation that has to talk about him having “no marital relations with Mary until she had borne a son”) we have Joseph also doing “as the angel of the Lord commanded him.”

Do we conceive of God’s will as being this thing that --- if we can just figure it out and obey --- then life will be good? If we can figure out where the rails are, we can get on them, understand the prophecy and chug to our final destination of endless rewards in heaven for good behavior. Is that the will of God? It sounds silly when caricatured like this, but it is pretty deep-set in many of our functional theologies. I hear it when I’m told that we must bring our children to church so that they have a moral upbringing. I remember singing Mrs. Alexander’s hymn *There is a green hill far away, without a city wall...* on Good Friday<sup>5</sup>. Once I started thinking about my faith I very quickly began to cringe at the line: *He died to make us good*. Every so often I will hear someone harrumph about ‘moral authority in the church’ when we don’t seem to be upholding a traditional view of law and order morality as though that were the revealed will of God.

So what is the will of God? And how do we discern it? And what difference does it make in our lives if we do? What are we praying for every time we pray “Thy will be done”? It is clear that, Mary and Joseph respond with obedience to the messengers of the Lord God, and, for us, the words and stories of those messengers are recorded in scripture. What is the will of God revealed there? Certainly there is sometimes a compelling and defining claim made by the Spirit on various individuals. This usually amounts to a call based in a realization of what really matters or what is of true and ultimate worth. Think about the prophets and their compunction in many cases to tell people things they did not want to hear about justice. Think about Mary and Joseph and their affirmation of new life and each other, however inconveniently it presented itself, and however much disapprobation they must have had to endure. Or think most, perhaps, about Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane that he be granted courage to live with absolute integrity. Is there some other way, O God, but not my will but thine be done. The will of God was that he act with all the integrity he could muster and not undermine everything he had been preaching and teaching as he pointed to the breaking into this world of the kingdom of heaven. We pray that when God’s kingdom comes and God’s rule is made fully manifest, so we may live in accord with what that means: lives that make for justice and peace whatever the cost may be, and however much conflict is engendered in so living. Imagine the outrage in Mary and Joseph’s circle. Look at what happened to Jeremiah, ostracized by everyone to an almost unbearable degree. Or think of Jesus, undermining traditional morality by reinterpreting the law. We put people to death for that.

The story of Christmas begins a story of reasonable and holy hope in a radically new way: the way that unveils the mechanisms of injustice and oppression by which we kid ourselves that we are somehow the guardians of God’s will and so

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<sup>5</sup> Cecil F. Alexander, 1847. See <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/t/i/tiagreen.htm>

get ourselves into all kinds of moral binds. The story of Christmas is the story of the making manifest of the will of God for a radically just and peaceful world. It is also the apparent costliness to all of us of bringing that world into being. This is not merely a cute story, enacted in pageants and pictured in crèche scenes, but the beginning of something that we will work out our whole lives long whenever we pray “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

As ever, let us respond to the gospel in silence and in prayer...