

Homily for December 18-19th 2021

Encounters with Grace

In the preface to his novel about heaven and hell called *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis he astutely observed:

“There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “Thy will be done.” All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. Those who knock it is opened.”

Those who are in hell says Lewis choose it and conversely those who choose purgatory and heaven do the same. Each and every day of our lives we are called to make the choice.....

whose will is to be done, mine or yours O God.

The Mass readings help us to explore this question of how and why would we choose to do God’s will over our own will? What would motivate us to be that kind of person who constantly desires joy, never stops knocking on the door that will lead us ever deeper into the life of grace and thus into a life where we want to do the will of God?

Before getting to a consideration of the will of God I want to begin by thinking about what it means for God to say to us “thy will be done”. Back in the 19th century the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche coined this phrase “the will to power”. The ideological outcome of this philosophy was most fully expressed in the political and social evils known as the National Socialism of the Third Reich and the Soviet Stalinism of the 40s and 50s. This will power can find a much more subtle expression in manipulative relationships. Say in a marriage, work situation or a parent child relationship. Here a person will use their power to control others disregarding their dignity and freedom. This results in disruptive and broken marriages, children scared of parents, and work environments characterized by a climate of tension and interpersonal suspicion and power struggles.

One of the places where this will to power is most destructive is in the church. When we think of people in positions of trust and authority who misuse this in a spiritual capacity it has ramifications for those subject to this will to power in ways that devastate their souls and can erode their ability to trust and believe in God. This will to power is always destructive. However, when we learn to say to God “thy will be done” this brings us under the influence of the will to love which is always constructive.

When we are learning this way of love and so want and do God’s will we discover a freedom and direction for our lives we cannot know any other way. And when two or more people discover this, it brings us alive because we know we are part of a much larger story than one of our own making. At the heart this story is Jesus. He is the primary author, and he never exercises this will to power but always the will to love. When we have a deepening awareness of this story, we want to echo the words from our Epistle where twice is the phrase “Lo I have come

to do your will O God". What does such a response look like? What does it mean to do God's will? Our Gospel gives us a beautiful answer. For here are two women who say "I want to do your will O God"

We are told that when Mary hears of Elizabeth's pregnancy, she went with haste to the hill country of Judah. The word "haste" not only means "with speed", but there is also an implication of motive as well. It means to be done eagerly and with earnestness. She desired to go. Why is that? Well of course on one level she wanted to be with her older cousin in her time of need. However, in that we remember this encounter whenever we pray the Rosary suggests to us there is more going on here than meets the eye.

That something more is better understood when we look at the first reading from Micah. We hear of a successor for David who will come from the City of David, Bethlehem. What did David do? He brought together the tribes of Israel, First Hebron in the south and then the tribes from the north came too. He brings them together and then establishes Jerusalem as his capital. Into the capital he brings the Ark of the Covenant and with reckless abandon he danced before the Ark. By doing this David's unified nation would worship God together. And then by the very clarity and beauty of its worship it would draw all the tribes of the world together. That is the story of David.

I want to show you how this same story is retold in the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. Look at the overtones here. Mary comes into the hill country of Judah. That is exactly where David found the Ark. Here is Mary the true Ark of the Covenant. What do I mean by this? In the Letter to the Hebrews in the 9th chapter we have detailed for us how the Ark of the Covenant was set up in the inner Sanctuary of the Tent of Meeting. Listen to how it is described:

Behind the second curtain was a tent called the Holy of Holies. ⁴ In it stood the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which there were a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant;

Not only was the Ark a beautiful object encased in gold, but its content also anticipates Jesus. The Ark contained the Manna; Jesus is the Bread of Life – the Ark contained Aaron's Rod, the brother of Moses and the first Levitical; Jesus is the Great High Priest – the Ark contained the Ten Commandments; Jesus is the Word of God made flesh.

Mary contained in her womb the word of God and the Bread of Life and the great high priest Jesus. How wonderful it is that just as David dances before the Ark, so too in the womb, John the Baptist does his own kind of Davidic dance before the true Ark of the Covenant, Mary.

This is why Elizabeth exclaims "Blessed are you among woman" The Ark was the most revered Holy Object in Israel and here is the Blessed one, more holy still. But there is more. This is the only time in the New Testament that the word "exclaimed" is used. In the Old Testament the equivalent word is used only five times, and each time it describes the worship of the priests as they exclaim praises of God before the Ark of the Covenant.

This is the great story that God and his faithful people have met, and that God has sent his son into the world so that as we learn to share in the will of God we are drawn into this great story of love. Because Mary's yes is central to the unfolding of God's will, give her a place of great importance, as did the Jewish people with the Ark of the Covenant.

In the Mass we join in the dance of David and John the Baptist with a kind of reckless abandon. We thereby insert ourselves into this great story stretching back to David, through to Mary and Jesus and up to our present time. When we attend the Mass with this kind of attentiveness then we can more fully live the ordinary events of our everyday lives with the purposefulness and care embodied by Mary and Elizabeth. Our lives can become ever more encounters with grace. Such encounters allow us to choose the will of God over our own wills or the will to power and so more fully discover

No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. Those who knock it is opened."