

What Is God's Will?

As giving an indication of very inadequate and confused thinking in the past, I referred at the end of my last talk, to the comment made by a friend of the Marshall family in the television programme, 'I can jump puddles', that their boy's illness was "God's will". It reminded me of what was said in another, earlier, programme, about orphaned girls, that that, too, was "God's will". It's obviously not so long ago that people believed that whatever the circumstances of life, good or evil, rich or poor, healthy or sick, it was all "God's will". But I ask the question again which I asked last week, 'Can it really be God's will that a child becomes sick and suffers?' What do you think?

One can ask a similar question not just in relation to sick children, but where suffering of all kinds is concerned. 'Can it really be God's will that a soldier dies in battle?' 'Can it really be God's will that someone is maimed in an accident?' There are all sorts of things which happen which are disorderly and wrong. Do we, in some fatalistic way, lay them all at God's door-step and leave it at that? And if we do, what sort of a God does it make of Him?

I know there are many places in the Old Testament where God is said to punish people; where He is said to have become angry, to have changed His mind, to have hardened someone's heart, and to have visited hardship on people. And I also know that these things said about Him have stuck with some people more or less to the present day. But what needs to be remembered here is that a concept of God which was appropriate three or four thousand years ago can't be taken to be the final statement on the subject. For that's what we have in the Old Testament.

I said a week ago, that just as an individual person progresses through various ages or stages, so similarly, the human race - or man collectively - has done so. And what is appropriate language, or what are appropriate concepts, at one age, are of course necessarily infilled and elaborated upon later on. God allowed Himself to be projected, to be thought of, to be regarded, and to be written about, as He is in the Old Testament, since that was appropriate to people at that stage of the development of the human race. It was meaningful to them. In time, different and more detailed concepts about God would be taught.

Take any subject and think of the different way it needs to be taught to children at different ages. Take rain for example. A child of five asks where rain comes from. A

simple, and very general explanation about clouds will probably be all that is needed. At the age of ten it is a different story. Perhaps by then you will need to talk in detail about evaporation and how clouds are formed, even the different kinds of clouds. At the age of fifteen, it is a different and more detailed story still.

A simple concept is enshrined in the Old Testament, that God is in control. And people in those Old Testament times could see no further than that being in control He must be the cause of both good and evil... someone who can build and someone who can destroy. It was, I repeat, a simple concept. But this simplistic belief satisfied them. They weren't troubled by the unfairness of it all and they felt at home with the image of God such beliefs made of Him. Now, however, we are at a stage where we both want to and can understand what they couldn't, that though very much in control of world and individual affairs yet, at the same time, God is not the cause of evil and disorder.

Because it is important and because there will be a need, perhaps, to reassure ourselves on this point many times, I would like to quote the following from Swedenborg's "*Heavenly Secrets*", also known by its Latin title, "*Arcana Caelestia*". He wrote there, "[It is a divine truth that the Lord is never angry, never punishes anyone, still less does evil to anyone. It is as far from the Lord to be angry with anyone as heaven is from earth.](#)"

Please put right out of your mind, then, any idea, any thought even, of God punishing people; of God being angry; of sickness or deformity as being His "will". Because that's not so. God wills the wholeness of every one everywhere. God wills human happiness and health and well-being. God wills people at peace with one another. God wills patience and tolerance and compassion and understanding. God wills only what is good in life. God is love.

How is it, then, you must be asking, that evil occurs, that sickness breaks out, or that accidents happen? Twice this year there have been near-successful assassination attempts on two of the world's leaders. What was God doing then? Where was He? How can He be said to have been in control? If He is all-powerful why didn't He stop these things happening?

We have to realise that if human life was to have meaning and fulfilment it was necessary that from the beginning God should endow the human individual with the freedom at least to think and love as he or she pleased. It seems at times a high price to pay, but there would be no human life without that freedom. There might be robot life, but there wouldn't be human life. You see, God created us for a purpose. He

created us that we might know happiness and fulfilment in serving our fellow men and women both in this world and in heaven in the spiritual world, when we die. We were created to know, experience and enjoy the heavenly life. The point is though, that however much God wants that for us He can't impose it on us. It's important that we should want it and choose it ourselves. Otherwise it's not our own. It's not part of us. If you are a parent think of the things you might like your children to become. But isn't it true to say that unless they want those things too, they will never be part of them. You may for example want your son or daughter to be a top class violinist. But however much you send them out for lessons unless they themselves want that, eventually it will come to nothing. When they are no longer under your control and authority, they'll let practice slide and the project will be abandoned. A spontaneous, free choice in the matter makes all the difference. In fact, it's crucial. Because it's so crucial, God organises things that, in adulthood, we are always able to exercise that freedom of choice earlier spoken about and without which we would not be human beings. We can choose His way or refuse His way. We can choose to think and will and, where possible, to commit evil, or we can choose to think and will and do good. We can be selfish or unselfish. It entails a risk. Indeed, I have already mentioned what seems at times a high price we pay for this freedom. But it's the only way. Yes, the risks are there. But let's not over-emphasise them at the expense of the great potential and possibilities this situation holds for everyone of us.

If someone makes up his or her mind to commit an evil, God will try by every means possible to dissuade them from that course of action. If, however, appeals to conscience and such-like are unsuccessful He will not openly intervene and ride rough-shod over their freedom of choice to prevent it happening. In reality, He can't, because this would involve the impossible reversal of the whole basis of His dealings with us.

This is not to say, though, that for a time He loses control of a situation; that He gives up, having tried, and simply lets the situation develop. He remains, though in unseen ways, still very much in control, as much as possible minimising the nature and extent of the evil and working with those involved and affected by it that in some way some good may come of it, some lesson may be learnt. Foolish choices and human wilfulness are, however, one thing. It's reasonably easy to trace a cause-effect relationship there. But it was unsought after sickness, or a reference to it, which first suggested the subject for this talk - a situation where foolish choices and human

wilfulness were not involved. If not from God, as has been emphasised, how can we account for that? How do we account for a totally uninvited deformity? Or the incomprehensible way in which some dreaded disease strikes people? It's a challenging thought that through our thoughts and actions and by reason of what we cherish in our hearts, we invite the closer proximity of the influence and activity of the heavens, on the one hand, and of the hells, on the other. There are, in other words, forces at work in the world, having gained access to it through the collective human family, the effort of some of which is directed to healing and wholeness, while the efforts of the rest are directed to a breaking down of order - whether it is the order of the human body, or whatever. They will strike where they can, especially where there is a weakness or susceptibility. It's not what God wants. It hasn't started with Him and He hasn't visited it upon us. We regret the fact that He can't step in and personally shield us from some infection or disease. At the same time and in the situation created by sickness, let us be open to the opportunity created for, perhaps, learning about ourselves, growing as spiritual beings, and being a person we would probably have never been otherwise.

You probably feel, as I do, that there is a lot in this subject of the Lord's care and control over human affairs and for this reason I'm taking it up again next week.

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