

Do not be foolish ...

... but understand what the will of the Lord is

A sermon given on Eleventh Sunday After Trinity, 15th August 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Online Attended Communion Service

Ephesians 5:15-20

The world, as they say, is divided into two kinds of people. On the one hand, there are those who think that in the end we are in this world by ourselves, and therefore we have to create our own sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. Such people say that we have to decide for ourselves what is important, we have to set our own goals and priorities. We have no wish to be limited by social convention or by tradition or by what others expect of us because we are free to live however we like. It's a vision that is quite noble, believing that human beings should take responsibility for their own destiny. But it is in the end a rather lonely vision. It sees human beings as being a little bit like a jar full of bull's eyes, each of us separate and independent from each other; each of us, the centre of our own self created universe.

The second category of person are those who believe that they are somehow connected to a bigger picture. That they are in some sense God's creatures and part of a bigger whole. Such people will have more of a sense that not just our own lives, but the whole world is a gift with a purpose and meaning built into it. And the challenge of life is not how to create meaning for ourselves, but how to discover the meaning that is already there, woven into the very fabric of life and the universe, and to work out what exactly is our place in the greater scheme of things.

That first category sees human beings as alone in a universe that is at best, indifferent. The second category sees us as having a calling within a universe that we can appropriately call home. And that second category of people is made up not just of Christians, but of Muslims, Jews, Hindus, New Age pagans, anyone who has a sense of life needing to be lived in response to something bigger than our individual selves.

And it's important that everybody reflects upon which of those two categories we're going to belong to because the consequences will shape not only the way we live our own lives, but the way we look at other people.

As our New Testament reading puts it this morning, 'Be careful, then, how you live. Not as unwise people, but as wise.' And the reading goes on, 'So do not be foolish.' (in other words, the opposite of being wise) 'but understand what the will of the Lord is.' It's interesting, I find that Paul says, 'Do not be foolish', because when the Bible talks about fools, it generally means those who are not paying attention to God. Remember Psalm 14, which begins, 'The fool says in his heart, there is no God.'

Foolishness can be shown not just by those who say there is no God, but also by those who say they believe, but still don't pay any attention to God and to carry on, for all practical purposes, as if they're just living for themselves. So the way of wisdom is to understand the will of the Lord; to pay attention and to try and work out how to live in the light of that greater reality we call God.

So I wonder what might be involved in understanding the will of the Lord?

Paul goes on to say, 'Do not get drunk with wine.' And I must admit, that sounds to me like a bit of an anticlimax - it makes me think, oh no, here we are wanting to know what the will of the Lord is, and all Paul can say is 'Don't get drunk.' It might confirm our worst suspicions about Christianity that it's all about living boring, clean-living, unexciting lives of conformity. But just hold on a moment. The exhortation not to get drunk on wine is just paving the way before saying, 'Be filled with the spirit.' Get drunk instead on the Holy Spirit - that sounds a bit more interesting. I wonder what he means by that? He goes on, 'As you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times, and for everything, in the name of Jesus, our Lord.'

I wonder, is that what you were expecting when I asked, 'How do we understand the will of the Lord?' The answer to the big meaning-of-life question about understanding the will of God, turns out not to be, 'Don't get drunk; don't get into trouble; keep your nose clean; follow the rules; behave yourself.' Instead, understanding the will of God boils down to one thing: Sing. 'Sing to God; sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs; make melody to the Lord in your hearts; give thanks to God at all times and for everything.'

And this, note, isn't just any old singing: this is the song of praise, the song of worship and thanksgiving. And the reason this is the key to understanding the will of

the Lord is because this kind of singing is all about communion. It's one of the ways we connect with God and with that wider reality that is woven into the universe. When we are praising God, our attention is turned outwards towards God. When we make melody to the Lord, we are being set free from captivity to ourselves and are facing full on towards the throne of God.

And if you notice the Psalms and the best kind of hymns praise God for what he has done; for his mighty acts in creation; in rescuing his people from slavery; and overcoming death; sending his son; in committing himself to being with us and for us in everything that goes on. And in our singing, we remind ourselves of who God is, not by making abstract statements about him being all powerful, all knowing, but by celebrating what he has done, just as our first hymn did this morning. 'Give thanks to God, the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' says St Paul.

And when we praise God, we become aware that we are not praising him by ourselves, but as part of all creation. Think of that great hymn, 'Sun and moon, bow down before him, dweller's all in time and space.' We become aware in our worship that all of creation has been made to enjoy communion with our creator. And in our singing we are not only expressing the praises of creation here on Earth, but we're joining in with the worship of all the hosts of heaven and anticipating our final destiny when we shall worship God face to face. Now, I have to admit that when I was a child, I found the prospect of heaven as an endless church service distinctly unattractive.

But when you think of those moments in worship, when you lose all your self-consciousness, when you have that sense of your heart being set free and opened up in adoration; that sense of connecting, maybe just for a moment with the heart of love - then time stands still, and perhaps we are glimpsing the worship of heaven, because it's what we have been made for.

So brothers and sisters, it's really no wonder that we have so much missed being able to sing over the last sixteen months or so. It's not just a nice pastime that we would like to take up again. It's actually one of the most important ways in which we connect with God and so know ourselves to be part of something bigger.

So 'Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.' He desires us to connect with him; to receive our love and respond to it in open adoration; to be set free from our self-preoccupations so that we can offer ourselves to God and for the world. And we can rejoice in being filled with the spirit as we make melody to the Lord in our hearts and as we sing that new song welling up out of our new life in Jesus Christ.

Reading Texts

Ephesians 5:15-20

¹⁵ Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, ²⁰ giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.