

Harvest Festival 6th October 2019

Mthr Mel Marshall

How do you will a thing before you will it?

Augustine *de libro arbitrio* 3.45, replied my husband. Reminding me of an ordinand who, having attended my husband's lectures, told me excitedly that it must be like being married to the Bodleian! Or the Internet! Touching, to think of the purity of the internet flowing through Cuddesdon, its bandwidth filled with nothing more worse than late-night Aquinas.

But, to my question: how **do** you will a thing before you will it? Augustine in the passage just cited declares it a mystery, even a paradox. Your will is just your will and so it's a logical nonsense to speak of willing your will to be otherwise. And yet the problem is as old as Aristotle (at least), and as new as this morning. God, I'm at mass because I want to pray. Or I want to want to. Or I want to want to want to. As St Paul famously puts it: "The good that I will, I don't do. Instead, the evil I don't will – that, I do." In the real world, on the real internet - where you can click, click, click your way into crippling debt, spiralling addiction, even a spell at her majesty's pleasure – in **our** world, Romans 7.19 says it all.

Thank God, then, for Jesus who has the answer to all our problems. The disciples in today's gospel must know it's harvest festival, because they want increase. "Increase our faith!" they say. Jesus answer seems a riddle, a recipe of more than Victorian weirdness. "First, take your mustard seed..." and then segues into an apparently unrelated story about a servant who may be served, or may serve, and be forgotten. So far, so puzzling.

But what if their question is our question? Aristotle's, Paul's, Origen's, Augustine's question. What if the disciples, those convenient narrative fall-guys for all our foibles, are asking "Rabbi, teach us to believe it, to commit to it, to **want** it". Help us take what we don't will - don't yet will - and **will** it.

Well, Jesus is not the man who if you ask for bread will give you a stone. But first he teases them a little. “Oh, you want the magical growing trick? That supernatural power that produces crazy flourishing, huge out of tiny, trees flying about, growing miraculously in sterile saline? You want to be filled with that power and mystery?” “Well, yes”, they say.

“Alright,” says Jesus. “Then get your apron on, and start scrubbing down that table for dinner.” And - he might have added - if you hold on a few chapters, you’ll see me getting my apron on as well.

The disciples want what we all want. The feeling first, conviction, passion, belief. And from those, actions will just flow. But Jesus says: not so fast. You **can** have the faith to move mountains. You **can** cultivate the will you don’t yet have. But you’ll have to do the least popular of all 21st century activities. You’ll have to do as you are told. By God.

Divine revelation and divine command have cut through the Gordian knot of our tangled wills. God does not wait to *feel moved* to do good. He is the unmoved mover. He is pure act. Jesus doesn’t deliberate about healing sick people or feeding hungry ones. He simply **does** what his Father commands him. And so his will – a human will, like ours - comes to mirror exactly the will of the Father. Later in this gospel, he takes off his apron, and dons the cloak of mockery, and he hangs humiliated, betrayed, and abandoned. Then he can truly assure the thief “This day you will be with me in paradise”. Because in his dying moment the thief has grasped the truth: that paradise, the kingdom of God, is for those who serve, and are forgotten.

Perhaps you saw the Gilets Jaunes, outside the smoking wreck of Paris cathedral? Their placards read: “For every euro you give to *Notre Dame*, give two to *Les Miserables*.” They’ve got us worked out. How we crave the gothic splendour of the faith without digging the roads and laying the sewers to reach it. And what of those who **do** dig ditches, plough fields? Or scavenge in bins to feed their families? On this harvest festival, as on every other, we want the hungry to be fed - without us having to feed them. We want farmers - who have the world’s lowest incomes, and Britain’s highest

suicide rates - we want them to be honoured. Without, you know, actually honouring them.

Get on the phone to the food bank and tell them you'll pack groceries once a fortnight. Get on the email to the Gatehouse and offer to wash dishes once a week. Get on the bus to Wolvercote and buy your veg direct from the farmers at the market. Batch-cook some meals and give them away. Find out the name of every person serving food in College, and call them by name every time they serve you. Offer someone lunch after mass, without asking yourself if they'll invite you back. The magic of faith doesn't happen **so that** we can do these things. It happens **because** we do these things. And the sacrament of the altar, that miraculous feeding of a thankless multitude - it has no more power or meaning for us than for the mouse in the organ-loft, unless what **we** bring to the altar is service.

My brothers and sisters, faith is not for believers. It's for doers. That's not Pelagian, it's not suggesting we earn our salvation. It's getting into the plodding habit of faith, tilling the soil where faith can take root, and then grow. Next time someone says they WISH they could have faith, or how they can't quite bring themselves to believe the arguments for the existence of God, give them the advice my vicar in Canada gave me: read a psalm every day, and join the rota for the Soup Kitchen. Faith is not found, nor increased, by wishing.

John Keble, founder of the College, was a great pastor. A woman wrote to him, heartsore, feeling the weakness of her faith. He answered: "Those who have gone on **trying**... in spite of all discouragement, inward and outward; in spite of low spirits, and the bitter sense of uselessness and unworthiness, they of all others may be said to walk by Faith. How can they fail to receive the blessing of Faith?"

There's no evidence that Jesus was a sporty man. He was certainly no fan of commercial enterprise. But you know the old training-shoe advertising slogan I'm going to quote, that I think he'd approve. Look at our absorption in the demands of our own lives; our handwringing about the direction the country, the whole world, is taking; the church's squabbles about how to read God's commands; our useless

indignation faced with suffering; our helpless sense that though we wish we willed it we find we don't wish to will it enough; our demand for faith to grow in ground we haven't tilled yet...

Oh that today you would listen to his voice. For beneath all this, our Lord and Master whispers the only words of victory: Just do it. Amen.