

‘What is God up to?’ we may often find ourselves saying. Or, as in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, just what is it the Lord wants me to do next – to stay or to go, to live or die? In one sense he seems indifferent to death, but also, then, indifferent to life, though he qualifies that with the more urgent need to stay alive for the sake of others. Indeed, in this light, going to Christ is an almost selfish indulgence. So he’s not really neutral in his intent, he’s still trying to puzzle out what it is that God wants but I wonder if we could say that, not knowing this for sure, he surrenders himself to his present situation until it becomes clearer; until, perhaps, the call to go to God in death is more certain, knowing what has become, I think, the Christian tradition that it is not really for us to choose. We wait on God. And, in this sense, Jesus himself does not choose death but follows the logic of his life until death – the logic, that is, of his faithfulness to the will of the Father. But this still begs the question of how he knows his Father’s will for him – whether to stay or go, live or die? This is where prayer is so vital. Not necessarily its manner, or even its regularity, but its truth, spoken from the heart. Remember, even on the cross, he’s not sure he’s fulfilled his Father’s will:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

A more genuine prayer is hard to realise. And we know its heard three days later but he doesn’t know that on the cross.

Now what has all this to do with the Parable of the Vineyard? Well, to echo Isaiah – God is not as we would have him a dispenser of what we assume is justice.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways

It’s a way of love which far exceeds our expectations or, indeed, our abilities. We just cannot love to this infinite degree, rich in forgiveness, by human reckoning unjust. The logic of our lives is very limited: we want quid pro quo, just desserts, results based on effort, a heavenly reward for a virtuous life. What’s the point of heaven if sinners get in? Well, of course, that’s precisely the point of heaven, as Jesus sees it: a banquet for all, no matter their past, their ability or at what point they join in. Is God indifferent to order then? On the basis of this parable, ‘Yes’, which gives hope to us all. For it’s not our ‘Yes’ to God that determines God’s ‘Yes’ to us, it’s always the other way round. God’s love precedes our own so we can wait on God as God waits on us, but do say ‘yes’ now to this promise of life before death makes the decision for us; before God, that is, stops hiring.

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