

Catherine Coldstream's recent account of her life as a Carmelite nun, 'Cloistered' is full of disturbing incidents- some part and parcel of learning the art of self- renunciation, of giving up everything, including ones own self-will, in order to follow Christ mediated through the structure and strictures of the Carmelite way, the Carmelite culture. But some are clearly not Christ-like; she encounters at times strong indifference, disparaging remarks and at one point is even beaten up by a failing superior, one who has cast in her lot with the predominant sub- group who are really running the show.

Psychologically and spiritually this leaves her all over the place. Although the story is based on 12 years at the Carmel, and even a final two after she has made a dramatic escape and then returned, it's essentially a story of her time as a novice and the turmoil she undergoes as she tussles indeed with that essential question for us all – how do we know what is God's will for us? It's a journey for her through the confusion engendered in all of us by imagining that our will and God's will are somehow separate, even necessarily opposed. At one point she is given a clear psychological, or just as well perhaps, spiritual clue that God's will does not necessarily mean an unqualified yes from ourselves. It's when she overhears angry voices from the Chapter room and is confronted soon afterwards by the superior telling her she has been accepted for temporary profession, but the manner in which it is said and the body language just don't add up, and she's not sure now quite what it is she's letting herself in for. But in the spirit of Carmel, as she understands it, she subjects her own will to the will of God as expressed by the Carmel community represented by the Superior, this totally unloving superior who is going to make life hell for her. Her instincts were correct, the momentary doubt and confusion were not so much her will but her conscience telling her to step back, to consider, to allow her own feelings, her own will to have it's say. But she ignores this voice and the rest of the book is really a slow realisation that somewhere down the line she has made a big mistake, not in entering Carmel – she received great peace and consolation and doesn't regret her initial call to this vocation – but in entering a Carmel which had become dominated by the self-will of others. It's a mix we all have to learn to navigate – this tussle between God's will mediated to us through our conscience and God's will as mediated to us through others, particularly when dressed up as a certain ecclesiastical way of doing things, dressed that is in a clerical or religious garb.

The run for freedom at the beginning of the book speaks perhaps to us all because freedom is what Christianity, is what Christ, is actually offering us. There's a subtle meditation on this in Paul's letter to Philemon which isn't about freeing Onesimus from slavery but of transcending slavery by recognising that Onesimus has now found a greater freedom in Christ. It's a freedom which Paul himself has experienced and wants Onesimus to share with Philemon, another freed slave in this sense. So, to come at last to the gospel, what Jesus is asking of us is not freedom from family or possessions but the freedom to hate them in the sense of preferring them less to the greater freedom he now offers us in Christ -the freedom in which we will find that ultimately our will and God's will co-incide. It's subtle, demands all our attention, and is essentially a gift which manifests itself in our ready love, not of ourselves but of others. We become self- possessed because of our security in Christ as opposed to being possessed or obsessed, by our possessions or the possessions of others.

*“Who could have divined the will of the Lord  
Who could have learnt it, had you not granted Wisdom  
And sent your holy spirit from above? (Wis 9)*

Or, in the words of the opening hymn at Lauds this morning:

*The Spirit of the living Lord  
Has set his people free.  
The pledge of perfect joy is ours -  
This day of liberty.*

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Monastery of Christ Our Saviour