



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, March 4, 2012
The Second Sunday in Lent

Choral Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.

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Sermon Series: "Lord, Teach Us to Pray"
SERMON 6: "THY WILL BE DONE, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN"

With this line, "thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," the Lord's Prayer wraps up its first section by repeating the word that appeared at the end of the first line, "heaven." We can feel the point, I think, by comparing the Prayer as we pray it, which is largely the same as the Lord's Prayer in Matthew's gospel, with the version found in Saint Luke. The Lord's Prayer is short already, but in Luke it is even shorter. It begins: *Father, hallowed be thy Name; thy kingdom come; give us this day . . .* Now hear the additional phrases: *who art in heaven . . . thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

In the first line, heaven is given as the place where God is ("Our Father, who art in heaven"). And now, with the second (and last) mention of "heaven" in the Prayer, heaven is further specified as the place where God's will is done. Whenever we pray this line of the Prayer, we are asking that the earth become a place where God's will is done—a place, that is, like heaven. But what does it mean for God's will to be done? What is God's will?

To speak of God's will is, by classic theological analogy, to speak of God's Spirit. Even as there are two basic movements of the human soul—to think and to desire—just so, out of the Father's heart come the Word and the Spirit. God's will is connected with God's Spirit, who is connected with God's desires.

Although we cannot really know what it means for God to have desires, it is clear that he has them. There are things that God wants to do and has done and will do, things that God wants to be. It is clear, for example, from the givenness of this world, that God desires that the world exist. In the beginning there was nothing, but the Spirit of God hovered over the waters and the Word of God spoke: Let there be light; let there be land; let there be fishes and animals; let there be man. You exist, and I exist, and the Manhattan granite upon which Saint Thomas is built exists, and everything that is exists only because God wills it to be.

Yet we see many things that do not seem to be in accordance with God's will. The entire matter of death: is that really in accordance with God's will? Evolutionary cosmology tells us that the random mutation of cells is necessary for the appearance of complex organisms, yet the same

random mutation process gives us cancer: is this necessary? Might the world have been otherwise? Scripture, at least, suggests that God's initial will for the universe did not include death, that all living things were to be sustained by fruits and leaves. So the natural environment as we know it ("red in tooth and claw") might not be in accordance with God's will. It is at least an open theological question.

But when we turn to the human sphere there is no question: much about human beings is not in accordance with God's will. The whole messy business of hatred, lust, and greed, not to mention murder, adultery, and stealing, not to mention war and terrorism, not to mention the frightening way that contemporary ideologies are poised to crush the intrinsic dignity of every human being—this human sphere is unquestionably quite skewed away from the will of God.

I asked, what is God's will? While we can never know all of God's will, we do know this much: he desires that there be a creation which includes human beings who live together, without sin, in friendship. Here is the passionate cry of the Lord's Prayer: that this inhuman human reality, this earth as we know it, become a place where God's will is done, a place like unto heaven.

How will that happen? At the end of all things, Jesus will return and take those who have believed in him and faithfully kept his commandments—take them (we hope to be there also) to the place he has prepared for them in heaven—into the economy of God's being. This brings about a new earth which is the transformation of the old earth, and in this new earth there will be no suffering or death and no sin. Everything will be animated by God's Spirit. God's will shall be done.

But of course our passionate cry—"thy will be done"—is not a cry for something far away in the future. We are asking God for something now. We want his name to be hallowed—we want more and more people to come to know and love and worship him. We want his kingdom to come, so that everything will come under his wise and good rule. We seek that will to be accomplished even now, even here.

But how can God's will be accomplished now and here?

The Lord's Prayer is found in Matthew as part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' great teaching whose purpose is to form the multitudes into a congregation of disciples. He wants us all to pray, "Thy will be done." It is Jesus telling us how to pray.

Then some months later—it might have been a year, it might have been three years—he prays the same prayer. It is Jesus showing us how to pray.

It is at night. Following many confrontations, having taken a final quiet meal with his disciples, he goes to a lonely place, to pray alone. And now he who taught us to pray, "Our Father," himself falls on his face and prays. He prays three times. "My Father," he says, "if it be possible . . ." He does not want to drink the cup of his blood; he does not want to die. And yet he wants even more to be obedient to the Father. "If this cannot pass unless I drink it," he says—and he says it three times—"thy will be done."

Do you see? When we pray "Thy will be done" we are asking for an end to everything that is wrong with this world, so that the earth will become filled with the glory of the Lord, so that the old creation will become the new creation that lives by the Spirit of God. But we are at the same time

praying with Jesus the words of his own self-offering. *We cannot pray “thy will be done” without putting ourselves on the line.* Face to the ground, Jesus accepted the deep truth of his being: that his life existed only to be given to others. God’s will shall be done when each of us accepts the deep truth of our being: that our life exists only to be given to others. That we learn to give away our life for God’s sake is the heart of “thy will be done.”